Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no
9
episodes Φ
Magical Girl
Raising Project

Since We Want to Beat the Archfiend
Magical Girl Raising Project
episodes Φ
Asari Endou
Illustration by
Marui-no

As the girl passed by, Mariko suddenly remembered who she was and grabbed her arm, stopping her in place.
The girl seemed slightly uneasy, looking back at Mariko with doubt and a bit of shock.
Primula Farinosa

"You dropped this."
"Oh, thank you."
Are Our Real Lives Fulfilling?
The one with the skull mark hanging over his head was a boy sitting in front of her who looked about middle school–age....
It was the boy who'd picked up her handkerchief.

Magical Girl
Raising Project
episodes
9
Asari Endou
Illustration by Marui-no
YEN ON
New York

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Magical Girl Raising Project, Vol. 9
Asari Endou

Translation by Jennifer Ward
Cover art by Marui-no

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MAHO SHOJYO IKUSEI KEIKAKU episodesΦ by Asari Endou, Marui-no
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Afterword
Yen Newsletter

*The four chapters from “The Goggles and the Tortoise” to “Rainbow Friendship” are edited and revised versions of short stories originally published in the *This Light Novel Is Amazing! Publishing Special Blog*.

*The three chapters from “Beyond the Triangle” to “The Three Sisters Raising Project restart” are edited and revised versions of short stories originally published in the *Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project* section of *This Manga Is Amazing! WEB*.

illustration by MARUI-NO
Design by AFTERGLOW

STORY ARCS

Magical Girl Raising Project

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT

THE STORY

The super-popular mobile game *Magical Girl Raising Project* can cause miracles: It turns one out of every few tens of thousands of players into a real magical girl. Having been bestowed with magical powers, these girls get to live each day to the fullest.

But then one day, the management sends them its unilateral decree: "We have too many magical girls, so we're cutting the number in half." And thus begins a harsh and ruthless race for survival among sixteen magical girls…

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT restart

THE STORY

Having been bestowed with powers by the Magical Kingdom, these magical girls work hard every day at helping people. But then the girls receive invitations from an unknown sender to a game called *Magical Girl Raising Project*. Trapped in an unfair game where they could die at any time, each of the sixteen magical girls comes up with a plan to survive, as the figure behind the curtain toys with them…

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT limited

THE STORY

During what was supposed to be a typical after-school club meeting, a small fairy named Toko appears out of nowhere with incredible news: All seven attendees have what it takes to become full-fledged magical girls! In exchange for their new-found abilities, they promise to save Toko from the evil mages who are hunting her down—but these baddies have some special magical-girl powers of their own!

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT JOKERS

THE STORY

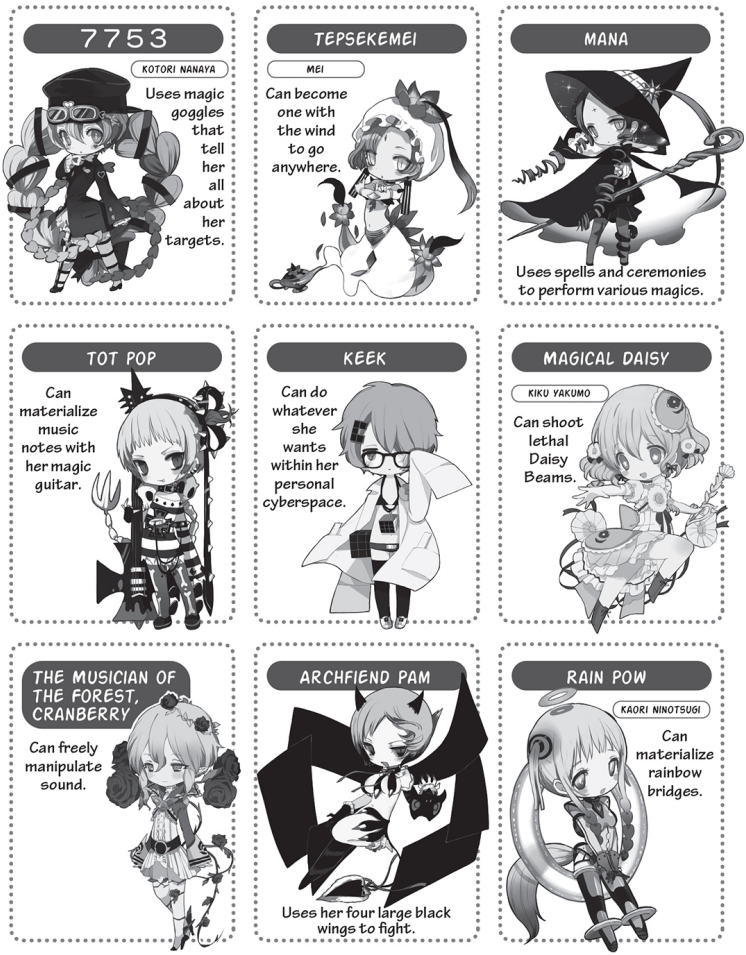
Sakura Kagami is just an ordinary girl, and her magical-girl persona, Prism Cherry, is just as ordinary, too. After the same old tired routine of saving people with her boring magic in a peaceful town, Sakura learns something incredible: Her classmate Nami Aoki is a magical girl, too!

It doesn't take long before Sakura and Nami's fate takes a turn and the veneer of magical-girl-hood falls apart to reveal something incredibly sinister…

MAGICAL GIRL RAISING PROJECT ACES

THE STORY

Snow White, a.k.a. the Magical-Girl Hunter, is searching for her dear friend Ripple when she's summoned by one of the Three Sages, the Magical Kingdom's highest authority. The Sage asks Snow White to locate a certain magical girl, but it turns out this mission has much more at stake than just a missing person…


7753
KOTORI NANAYA
Uses magic goggles that tell her all about her targets.
TEPSEKEMEI
MEI
Can become one with the wind to go anywhere.
MANA
Uses spells and ceremonies to perform various magics.
TOT POP
Can materialize music notes with her magic guitar.
KEEK
Can do whatever she wants within her personal cyberspace.
MAGICAL DAISY
KIKU YAKUMO
Can shoot lethal Daisy Beams.
THE MUSICIAN OF THE FOREST, CRANBERRY
Can freely manipulate sound.
ARCHFIEND PAM
Uses her four large black wings to fight.
RAIN POW
KAORI NINOTSUGI
Can materialize rainbow bridges.

CHARACTERS

POSTARIE
TATSUMO SAKAKI
Can send any item back to its owner.
PRINCESS QUAKE
CHIKO SATOU
Fights enemies using the power of earth.
PRINCESS TEMPEST
MEI HIGASHIONNA
Fights enemies using the power of wind.
PREMIUM SACHIKO
Can make someone incredibly lucky for a short while.
SORAMI NAKANO
Knows what's inside things without opening them up.
KAFURIA
Knows who will be the soonest to die.
PRINCESS INFERNO
AKARI HIYAMA
Fights enemies using the power of fire.
PRINCESS DELUGE
NAMI AOKI
Fights enemies using the power of water.
PRISM CHERRY
SAKURA KAGAMI
Can transform the reflections in her mirror.
FILRU
Can sew anything together with her magic needle and thread.
PATRICIA
Can render any enemy powerless with her magic handcuffs.
HANA GEKOKUJOU
Can make senses incredibly sharp.
MARIKO FUKUROI
MARIKA FUKUROI
Can make various magic flowers bloom from her head.
SNOW WHITE
KOYUKI HIMEKAWA
Can hear the thoughts of those in need.
ULURU
Is very good at lying.
PUKIN
Can change the thoughts of anyone she stabs with her magic sword.
SONIA BEAN
Can make whatever she touches crumble to bits.
LAPIS LAZULINE
Can use gems to teleport.

CHARACTERS

The Goggles and the Tortoise

This story is set right after the *Magical Girl Raising Project limited* ends.

The Goggles and the Tortoise

Magical girls' bodies are strong, but when it comes to resilience and regeneration abilities, mages aren't much different from humans. They can, however, use magic spells to heal their wounds. This is why even when they do get injured, they don't go to the hospital.

So then do mages not need hospitals?

Not so. Mages do use hospitals. For a mild cold, rather than going through the big hassle of ceremonial magic—going to buy a chicken, cutting its head off, and chanting forever—you could save time and money simply obtaining cold medicine from your doctor.

And besides, there were reasons other than illness and injury you'd need a hospital. If you were affected by a magicked poison or drug, then in order to cleanse yourself of the effects, you went to a specialist hospital. Unlike with simple poisons or drugs, there was no such thing as being too cautious if it was the magical type. If you didn't spend time with a specialist to get the right treatment, the effects would linger.

This was the reason Mana had been immediately hospitalized following the incident. She'd strengthened her body through magical doping to the point that she could contend with even the strongest of magical girls, and the consequences were not at all mild. Once the drug wore off, she immediately foamed at the mouth and passed out.

Mentally and physically at the end of her rope, 7753 had believed she was a goner. She'd clung to Mana, sobbing belligerently even after they'd been taken into an ambulance. Her subsequent, sorrowful days were spent in tears, remembering the incident and everyone who had fought with them. When her boss had told her Mana had survived, 7753 had cried some more.

Unlike 7753, her new roommate Tepsekemei showed no superficial signs of emotion, living her life dispassionately. It seemed she'd taken 7753's standard "Please make yourself at home"

remark quite seriously, as she conducted herself more freely than the owner of this thirty-something-year-old house. She fashioned the old office belonging to 7753's father into her base and fully occupied herself, exploring the interior of the house and fiddling around in the yard.

With that as part of her life, she also engaged in study, sitting down at the table every day to look at picture books for small children and read the letters out loud. She mastered the alphabet, and with time, she was able to read books for children—slowly and only as long as there was a pronunciation guide.

Tepsekemei had not shown tears ever since the moment she'd cried when killing Pukin, but she really was sad—that much 7753 could tell by observing Tepsekemei through her goggles. Tepsekemei just didn't show it.

The incident had devastated the town, and there had been a lot of civilian casualties, too. The things they'd tried to protect had slipped through their fingers one after another.

As for the rumor about a plan to use a weapon of mass destruction, 7753 heard the Department of Diplomacy had flatly denied it. The shock of that made her weak in the knees. So then why had they all been sent out to the battlefield to die so helplessly? According to her boss, "Now that things have come to this, the Department of Diplomacy will never acknowledge such rumors."

And she was completely right. There was no way the Department of Diplomacy would reveal the truth now. But even if the rumors were true, the fact still remained that 7753 had gotten Kuru-Kuru Hime, Funny Trick, and Weddin killed. Her naive insights had led them to underestimate Pukin and mistakenly believe they could negotiate with Frederica. She had no excuses for what occurred.

7753's boss tried to console her—"You did the best you could have"—but that wouldn't bring the dead back to life. Her boss didn't blame her or punish her for defying orders. 7753 would rather have been punished. She knew that was naive of her, but she still wanted it.

Her goggles could see magical girls' abilities, and when she pointed them at someone, she would learn not only their individual parameters but everything about them—including everything they had ever thought or done. That person's very life story: the

beautiful, the ugly, the noble, and the dirty—all of it. Kuru-Kuru Hime, Funny Trick, and Weddin had all pushed their fears down so they could stand up and protect what was important to them. They'd been terrified and had wanted to run away, but they'd made up their minds to fight anyway. They'd trusted 7753 when she'd continued to lie to them. They had been righteous magical girls. They'd had futures.

7753 had felt absolutely obligated to get them back alive, no matter what happened. Yet she had been the one to survive.

The regrets never stopped coming. If not for Tepsekemei, who'd been sent to her along with the message from her boss, "Take care of her. It seems she has no complaints as long as she has her magic lamp, but do check to see if she'll go wild or not," then 7753 might have been crushed all alone.

It was rare for a magical girl to be an animal, pretransformation. Among the countless magical girls 7753 had encountered during her career, there had only been three who'd begun as something other than human. Often, they were of a more impulsive and guileless type compared to humans, quickly making decisions to take action, straightforward in their expression of emotions like anger and joy, and making clear who was their friend and who was their enemy.

Tepsekemei deviated from that sort of animal-type magical-girl template. She hardly ever showed emotion and was calmer even than human magical girls. It wasn't fully unexpected, based on how you'd imagine a tortoise to be.

A few days after the incident, with a single model lamp as her one possession, Tepsekemei had come to 7753's house and moved in. Completely indifferent to any of 7753's crying, occasionally, she would go out into the yard and gaze up at the sky, or dig into the ground, or even bury herself.

"I don't want you going outside as a magical girl," 7753 told her.

"Mei prefers to be a magical girl."

"But the neighbors might see."

Tepsekemei must have basically understood 7753's concerns, since when she went outside, even if she was just in the yard, she would meld with the wind and fade the colors of her body as much as possible.

While 7753 was lying around depressed, Tepsekemei was

making piles of earth and moving shrubs to different places, altering the yard as she pleased. No matter how many times 7753 told her to stop, she still wouldn't listen.

"This is Mei's home now; Mei can do what Mei wants."

"Uh, no, it's my house."

"We're cohabiting, so it's Mei's house."

"*Cohabiting*… How do you know that word?"

"It was on the TV."

7753 wished Mei would call her a roommate, at least. Maybe she'd been a male before her transformation. For her first-ever cohabitation partner to be a male tortoise of all things would be way too pathetic, and 7753 was too scared to check Tepsekemei's sex pretransformation.

Tepsekemei began having her way with not only the yard but also the interior of the house. She was making it a more pleasant living space for herself, but it didn't feel comfortable to 7753 at all. No longer able to take it anymore, 7753 eventually made Tepsekemei stop. With all this going on, she didn't have the time to be depressed. She wondered if maybe Tepsekemei was deliberately being a pain to distract 7753 from her worries—but then when she tried checking via her goggles, she found this was not at all the case, and the other magical girl was merely someone who did what she wanted.

Besides, it wasn't like this had actually taken her mind off things.

Like Hana, who kept fighting Pukin until her dying breath.

And Archfiend Pam, who had tried to save Hana.

And Ripple, who had gone to save Archfiend Pam and hadn't come back.

And Weddin, who had cried over how she'd longed to be a magical girl.

And Funny Trick, who had crawled up to attack Pukin, even when she'd been mortally wounded.

And Kuru-Kuru Hime, who had taken on the dangerous role of being the bait all on her own.

And the bent road signs, twisted guardrails, broken roads, crumbled cement-block walls, billowing black smoke, people on the ground, tipped trucks, the train crashed into buildings.

Mana had been carried off elsewhere. 7753 and Tepsekemei had gone to help with relief. There were dead bodies everywhere;

they couldn't save them all no matter how hard they'd tried. It had been like being in a nightmare where you're in the water, and even if you kick your legs, you stay stuck in place.

7753 had started maintaining her magical-girl form, even when at home. If she'd remained in human form, she really would have been crushed under the weight of her emotions. Surely not even a trace would have remained. She wouldn't have been able to escape through alcohol or sleep—her mind would have caught up before she could run. It would have crushed her. Maybe it was a good thing that she was even capable of wanting to go on despite the circumstances. She never got to the point of, *Who cares if it crushes me? I* should *be crushed.*

While rebuking Tepsekemei for her eccentric behavior, 7753 cooped herself up in the house in a depression for one week, then two—and then on the third week, she got a call from her boss.

Her boss told her the name of a hospital, a wing and room number, and a time of day.

"We've received permission from Chief Mana's father. She's currently recuperating but is apparently very bored now that she has nothing to do. I'm sure she'd be glad if you paid her a visit. I'm busy dealing with the aftermath of recent events, so go and give her my best regards."

A hospital visit. 7753 not only wanted to see how Mana was doing but also felt so terrible that she couldn't face her. Both feelings were sincere and from the heart.

"Mei knows about hospital visits. Mei saw on TV. Mei wants to go, too."

Tepsekemei wanted to go. But even if Mana's family said it was okay, what would Mana herself think?

The next day, 7753 hid her hair and costume under a coat and hat and left the house, avoiding the neighbors' eyes all the while. Since it was almost Christmastime, the streets downtown were lined with Japanese fir trees and decorated with lights and tinsel. Even the pine by the teahouse was decorated with Christmas lights.

It was a lifeless season, her breath white in the air, the trees on the boulevards wilted to a dull dark brown. Nonetheless, the people bustled about joyfully, their mood positively contagious.

Tepsekemei was trying to poke her face out of the bag hanging off 7753's shoulder in an attempt to get a glimpse of the outside, so 7753 couldn't let her guard down.

“I thought you promised to stay still in your lamp.”

“Mei wants to see outside.”

“I’ll let you out in the hospital room, so just wait until then, please.”

On the way, they bought a bunch of flowers at a flower shop. 7753 had the florist arrange as bright a bouquet as possible, with a big pink cymbidium soaring up in the middle. A ribbon tied it all together.

She also bought some chocolate mousse cakes from a famous sweets parlor that had been featured on TV. These adorable desserts came topped with whipped cream and strawberries, and they were so popular that the shop usually sold out before noon unless shoppers ordered one in advance.

“Mei smells something tasty.”

“I told you not to poke your face out.”

7753 added a slice of cheesecake to the order and put it in her bag in order to shut up Tepsekemei. Magical girls didn’t need to eat or drink, so why was she so drawn by the smell? It had to be because she was an animal.

She transferred trains and crossed over the prefectural border to arrive at a hospital so big, it would take an hour to walk its perimeter. There was not a single mark on the stark white walls… Actually, no—when she looked closely, there was bird poop stuck on it.

This hospital was a branch office of the Magical Kingdom. It was even equipped with facilities to draw magical poison out from mages. But it wasn’t like they didn’t take regular patients—in fact, that was what they mainly received, rather than the much rarer magic-related patients.

“Mei hates this smell.”

“Nobody likes the smell of antiseptic. Just put up with it, please.”

From the front gates, they passed by the side of the parking lot and a chain-link fence with a ditch along it to go into the hospital. There were some decorations to stir up Christmas spirit, like wreaths and Santa statuettes. It seemed the hospital wasn’t separate from the world; the inside was no different from everywhere else. The doctors and nurses who passed by seemed kind of upbeat.

7753 checked her current location and destination at the facility map, but first, she went into an empty-looking lounge.

“Going pee?” asked Tepsekemei.

“Why would you get that idea in a lounge?”

The mirror reflected 7753 with her goggles on. She tried changing the settings from *sadness* to *suffering*, and then after that to *loneliness*. Nothing came up. As she should know. The mirror ultimately reflected her image and nothing more. It wasn’t 7753—it was just her reflection.

Sighing at her own foolishness and sentimentality, 7753 took off the goggles and tucked them inside her bag. It was one thing to keep them on during emergencies, but it was a bad idea to have them on when she was going to meet a superior. She’d been thinking similar things the first time she’d met Mana in B City, too. And then after introducing herself, she’d immediately been taken to task for not coming in magical-girl form.

“Why are you smiling?” Tepsekemei asked.

“…I’m not smiling.”

Checking in the lounge mirror that her hair and costume were properly hidden, 7753 left the room. Her steps on the linoleum rang strangely loud, and she slowed, setting her feet down smoothly and softly as she walked along. Her legs were heavy. Or rather, her feelings were heavy. As she approached the hospital room, they got heavier. Her throat dried out, and her palms dampened instead.

What was Mana thinking right now? What did she think about what had happened back then? Mana had seriously cursed her out hard, but 7753 was aware that she’d done enough to deserve that. Mana might shower her with abuse again, but 7753 also thought it’d feel easier if she did.

7753 knocked on the door of the hospital room, and hearing the voice prompting her to “Come in,” she went inside.

She squinted the moment she entered. Multicolored magic sigils, making lavish use of fluorescents and in varying sizes, large and small, were drawn on the ceiling, floor, and walls, as if in an attempt to bury every surface. The room was fully furnished with a big LCD TV, an electric kettle, a freezer, cushions, and even a leather sofa bed.

Placed in the center of the room was a canopy bed, and the small-framed girl lying there was looking toward her.

“Oh, it’s you.” She adjusted the position of her glasses with a snort.

7753 rubbed at her eyes, which had started welling with tears.

“Um…you seem well.”

“Don’t be stupid. Anyone who’s been hospitalized clearly isn’t well.” Mana turned her face to the window. This meant she was looking away from 7753, but she didn’t yell at her to leave. “Sit wherever,” she said quietly, and 7753 was so relieved, her eyes started tearing up again. Lately, her tear glands had been so hopelessly leaky.

“Can Mei come out?” Tepsekemei asked.

“Oh, yeah. Go ahead.”

When Tepsekemei slid out of 7753’s bag, for some reason, she had the goggles on.

“What are you doing?! I said no goggles!” 7753 hurriedly snatched away the goggles and tossed them into her bag.

Tepsekemei seemed to have zero guilt, boldly sprawling out on the couch. “No punch yet?”

“What? Punch? To drink?”

“Like when you pay a visit to someone and hit them.”

“No, no, no! It’s not that kind of visit!”

“What about tasty stuff?”

“Look, um, this is for the visit… I bought this to give as a present… Um, Mana, please have this, if you like. Oh, and these, too…”

There was a large-ish glass vase beside a watering can, but nothing was in the vase.

“May I put these flowers in here?”

“Do what you want.”

7753 couldn’t handle just standing there. Moving around would take her mind off things. She filled the bone-dry vase with water in the bathroom sink. A private room with its own bathroom and sink —kind of like a VIP suite. Everything about it was lavish, from the smoothly polished ceramic sink to the size of the room and its furnishings, but there were no flowers.

It made her feel kind of lonely. When she came out of the bathroom, Tepsekemei was setting out the chocolate mousse cakes on paper plates. Tepsekemei wasn’t the type to set a table of her own accord. She’d also poured out hot water from the pot, and teabags were floating in cups. Mana must have ordered her to do it. 7753 glanced over at Mana, who was looking out the window. She didn’t seem angry or sorrowful, either.

7753 stared at the floor but straightened her posture. “Things

are really getting into the holiday spirit out there—Look, even the flowers." She took care to avoid making Mana think she was forcing a cheerful tone.

Sitting down next to Tepsekemei, she picked up a paper plate and cup of tea and looked at Mana's face. Her glasses reflected the light that seeped through the curtains, and 7753 couldn't see her eyes. Her characteristic curled hair had gone straight again and was tucked under the blankets. She was wearing the kind of sweatshirt they sold at the big emporiums, and she appeared less like someone who had been hospitalized for a long time and more like a lazy slob.

Her gaze still pointed out the window, Mana took one bite of the mousse, then another. Maybe it was the light of the sun on her skin, but her face looked very white.

"How have things been going with you?" Mana asked.

"The same, more or less. Though it seems the boss is busy with cleanup."

"I see… Once things have settled and aren't so busy, I'd like to meet your boss. Could you let her know that?"

"Yes, I'll do anything I can."

"I want to investigate that incident more." Mana cut into her mousse and took another bite. Her face seemed to have regained a little color.

Outside the window, clouds were gently floating by. The atmosphere inside the room was rather heavy. What should she talk about? If she was seeing Mana, there was only one thing to talk about: the incident. Hana, Archfiend Pam, and Ripple. Funny Trick and Kuru-Kuru Hime and Weddin. 7753 couldn't bring herself to talk about that, though.

Mana parted her lips, wet with tea. "There's some things I want to know more about. Things I want to look into. Once I'm out of here, I'll get on that immediately."

"Things you want to know?"

"'You'll never see the full picture if you only look at it from one side.' Hana often said that." Mana looked up at the ceiling, picked up the TV remote and stared at it, then immediately set it down again. "I want to see for myself." Mana squeezed the edge of the blankets tight and then let go again repeatedly, then put her hands on her cheeks and pressed them from both sides. 7753 didn't really get what she was trying to do.

Mana put some mousse in her mouth and sighed. “It’s like…”

“Yes?”

“It’s like, you know…”

“Yes?”

Mana put down her teacup. “It’s like, it’s like…”

“Yes…?”

“Nobody comes to visit me.”

Seeing the dry flower vase, 7753 had guessed that much. But hearing it directly from the one in question, she didn’t know how to react.

While 7753 was hesitating, Tepsekemei answered, “We’re here.”

“Only you two. My dad came, too, but he’s a research nut, so he didn’t bring me anything. Just the bare minimum, like my clothes and stuff.” Mana’s voice was shaking. She thrust out her lower lip and stuffed the remaining mousse in her mouth all at once.

“Well, um—,” 7753 began.

“Nobody loves me. Hana…Hana is gone, now.”

There was the sound of her sniffling. Large teardrops spilled down her cheeks, one after another, and 7753 rose up from her seat. “A-are you…okay?”

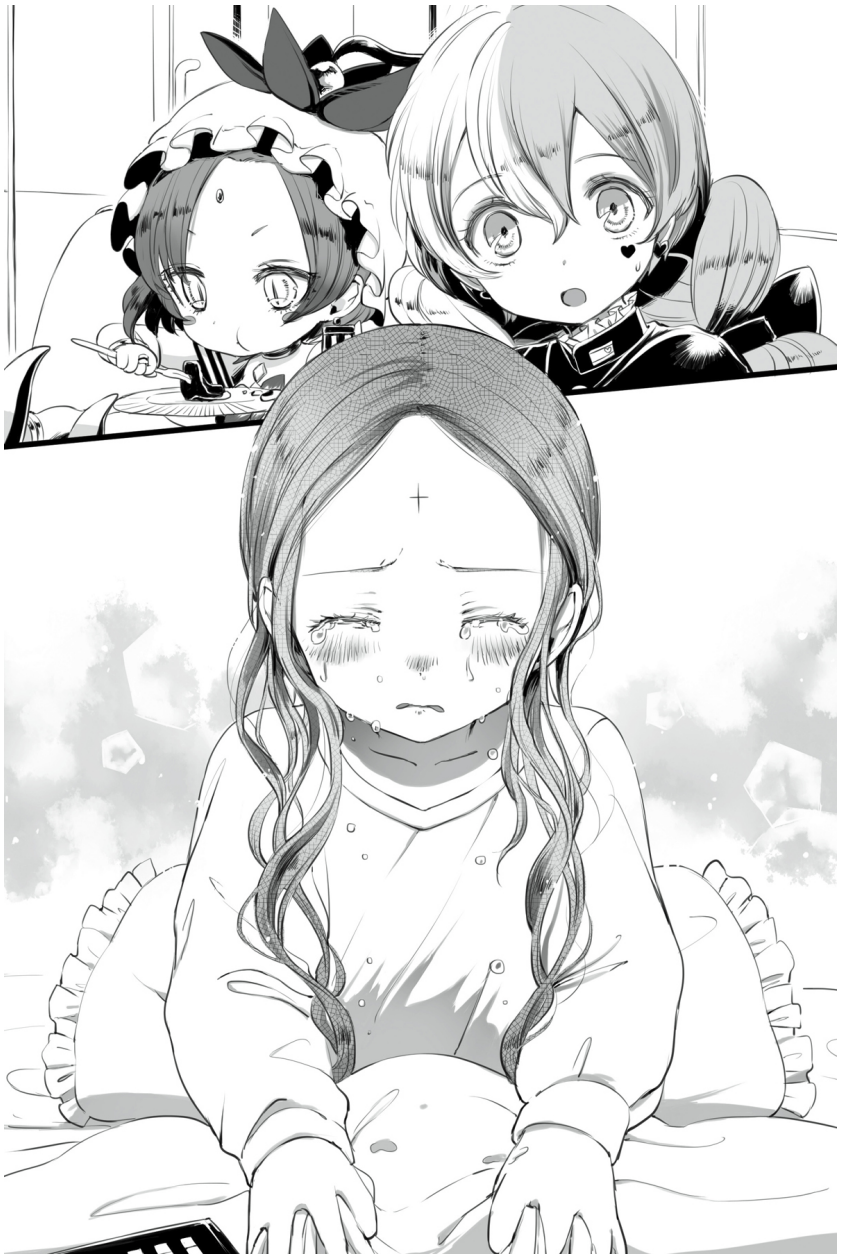
“Hana… Hana…”

Her body trembled, and that made her voice tremble, too. She started crying like a baby. Her face was red. She must have gotten agitated. 7753 looked over at Tepsekemei, but she was not at all bothered, silently eating her mousse. Obviously, 7753 couldn’t call for a nurse.

Mana continued to sob like a child, while 7753 stood frozen from indecision, and Tepsekemei began reaching for 7753’s chocolate mousse. Suddenly, the door opened with a rattle.

“Ah! You’re eating something bad again!”

It was not a bear but a middle-aged nurse with a large, bearlike frame who lumbered into the room. She picked up a plate with chocolate mousse on it, sniffed it, and scowled. “Alcohol! What on earth were you thinking?!”



“Oh, um, well—”

“Mages are sensitive. It’s not unusual for drugs taken orally to have incredible effects. And on top of that, to come visiting a mage who’s in the hospital for toxin cleansing, of all things, bringing sweets with alcohol in them!”

The giant nurse was probably a mage specialist and possessed that sort of knowledge. Until the nurse mentioned it, 7753 hadn’t noticed the alcohol. Panicking, she brought her plate close to her nose. The smell had been covered by the disinfectant scent that wafted around the whole hospital, but now that she’d been made aware, it really did smell of alcohol.

“Put in a state like this… You poor thing.” The giant nurse embraced Mana, who clung to her, then finally bawled hard. “This sort of thing is exactly why I say magical girls are so insensitive!”

“Y-yes, pardon me, I’m sorry—”

“Get out!”

“I-I’m so sorry!”

They were practically chased out.

Come to think of it, 7753 vaguely recalled Hana having said something like, “The chief gets friendlier when she’s got a little alcohol in her.” It was too late to be remembering that now. Her weakness to alcohol was beside the point—bringing alcoholic sweets to a patient in the hospital was unquestionably lacking in sensitivity.

In a bathroom stall, 7753 hugged her bag and hung her head. She had failed. She’d done something she shouldn’t have. There were other things she should have talked with Mana about instead—and lots of things she had wanted to talk about. She wanted to know trivial things, too. Like what foods she liked or the type of guy she was into. Anything would have been fine.

“What’s it mean when the red things go down?” came a voice from inside her bag. 7753 lifted her head. What did Tepsekemei think about having been kicked out? Surely she mustn’t care.

“…What do you mean, red things?”

“The round things with the pointy ends.” Tepsekemei slid out of the bag. Suddenly the stall was very cramped. “They come up in here.” In Tepsekemei’s outstretched hand were 7753’s goggles.

“Oh, the hearts?”

“Mei was watching with these the whole time. When we went in, the hearts of the lady we were visiting all went down at once. I’m curious about what happened to her.”

The display on the goggles was *lonely*, the same setting they’d been on before 7753 entered Mana’s hospital room.

“Mei’s very curious.” With that, Tepsekemei slid back into the bag the same way she’d come out.

7753 closely examined the goggles. Under the bathroom lights, they reflected a cheap yellow color.

She’d gotten Mana drunk on spiked mousse and made her cry, but still, maybe she’d been just a little bit useful. Mana’s loneliness had reduced. And that went the same for 7753. Seeing Mana’s face for the first time in a long while, her own loneliness had decreased. She could tell that much, even if she couldn’t view herself through her goggles.

7753 got up.

“Let’s try going back once more. Maybe we’ll get kicked out again, but then we can visit another day. There are still lots of things I want to talk to her about.”

“Mei thinks that’s a good idea, too. Mei is staying with Grace.”

“…Grace?”

“Grace is like Weddin. Like how she’s puny.”

Not only was 7753 being mistaken for someone else, she also got the feeling she was being insulted somehow. But she figured even if she did correct Tepsekemei now, she wouldn’t remember it. In that case, she’d tell her later. The things 7753 should do now, she would do now.

Mana had said she wanted to investigate the incident. So then this magical girl would help.

7753 turned the stall knob.

Hot to Tot About Music

This story is set a long time before the *Magical Girl Raising Project* game first started.

Hot to Tot About Music

Suddenly there came two sounds loud enough to make anyone want to plug their ears. The first was from the impact of a door violently banging open, and the second was the ricochet of the door against the wall.

She knew only one person who would walk in here like this.

"Heeey! It's your lover, the cutie Tot Pop! Haven't seen ya in forever!"

Her excitement was equal parts irritating and sickening.

This girl was committed to the punk-rocker aesthetic: dressed in a long-sleeved T-shirt matched with a rough-looking guitar, a skull motif, and a shiny lip piercing. She even had on a thick face of makeup, particularly for a magical girl, as if bragging, *"Of course a star should be wearing stage makeup."*

"I know, okay… You don't have to introduce yourself. I know your name well enough that it bugs me…"

"What's wrong, Keeky? You seem down. As the senior student here, I'll listen to your troubles."

"What do you mean, senior student?"

"Ahhh, sorry. That was a Tot Pop secret, huh? Pretend you didn't hear it."

Damn it, she's as incomprehensible as usual… And so obnoxious…

Keek spun her chair around and openly sighed at Tot Pop, but Tot Pop didn't flinch; to her, it seemed only natural to just make herself at home. Without asking permission, she pulled up the folding chair that was off to the side and took a seat, leaning her guitar against the steel table.

"Listen," said Keek. "I'm busy at the moment."

"No worries, I'm totally free right now."

"I don't care. Go off and spend that free time by yourself."

"Don't be so mean. Once I'm done with what I came for, I'll be gone super quick."

Keek tried to push up her glasses with her right hand, but the sleeve of her white lab coat was too long, so her fingers never emerged from the sleeve. “Give me a break, seriously… You always ramble on and on about one thing or another whenever you open your mouth…”

“I can’t help that. It’s ’cause I have so much fun when I chat with you, Keeky.”

Keek was choked into silence. She cleared her throat a few times to cover it. This was no good. She couldn’t accept Tot Pop’s charm. This was how the girl always got her way.

“Aw, Keeky, your cheeks are all red!”

“Huh? No way—You’re kidding?!”

“Yep, I’m kiddin’! Yaaay, gotcha!”

“You…seriously…*aghhh*!” Keek jumped to her feet, knocking back her chair, which rolled into the corner, kicking up some dust in its wake.

Shoulders trembling, and actually red-faced this time, Keek glared at Tot Pop. On the other hand, Tot Pop handled being glared at like it was water off a duck’s back; she was totally composed. In fact, she was even smiling.

Seeing her smile like that made Keek weaken. She tried to sit down, but there was no chair.

“Good grief, you’re… You’re seriously just…”

“Seriously just?”

“It’s fine, whatever. What’re you here for?”

“Do you know any important people from the management division?”

“No.”

“Then do you know people who know people?”

“I guess I do know some, but…”

“Introduce me.”

“What?”

“Help me out here, pretty pleeeease!”

Keek did have a few important acquaintances. After all, Keek herself counted as a fairly important person. Still, she’d already given up on getting Top Pop to treat her as such.

She could introduce Tot Pop to someone who knew someone who knew someone high up in the management division. And the division’s top brass hated the more infamous magical girls, didn’t they? In that case, Keek might be able to get one of the higher-ups to rebuke Tot Pop for her. Maybe then Tot Pop would feel a little remorseful about her actions.

“Fine, I’ll tell you. You better be grateful.”

“Thaaaanks! Love ya, Keeky! Smooches!”

“You’re so annoying! Stop that! Don’t get your drool on me!”

The room was all black except for the various multicolored mandala-like magic sigils shining within. In that room sat an old man and a girl facing each other.

The old man was reclining in a leather-upholstered chair, glaring at the girl in intense displeasure. Between his floor-length robe, long white beard, and knobby, overstated staff, all symbols indicated that he was a mage.

The girl had a chunky-looking guitar lying on her lap. Her style was aggressive, with a shirt and pants that made lavish use of studs and belts and a hair decoration in the shape of a bear trap. It seemed more appropriate to call her a musician or guitarist than a magical girl. In contrast to the deep wrinkles in the old man’s brow, she had an excessively broad grin on her face extending from ear to ear, as if something about this was amusing to her.

The old man clicked his tongue like he wanted her to hear it. “I came to this meeting because I heard this was an introduction from Master Osk… I didn’t imagine it would be with a magical girl.”

His voice was low and mumbly. The way he was muttering, it almost felt like he was talking to himself. “I can’t stand you magical girls.”

“Sheesh, there you go again.”

“I’ve been driven into this position all because of you people and the barbarians you’ve created. I would even say I despise your lot…” He didn’t react to the girl’s comment. He was looking more and more like he was talking to himself. “Normally, you wouldn’t even be allowed access to this room. You’re a mere magical girl—grown arrogant, getting the mistaken idea that you’ve become a mage. Just who do you think you are?”

The old man pointed to the room’s entrance with his staff, the tip of which was trembling—not out of fear but with anger and old age. The old man’s voice got lower and lower, becoming increasingly difficult to hear. “Get out. I have nothing more to say to you.”

“Come on, now. I’m sure we’ve got something to talk about.”

The girl put her hands up, smiling all the while, not a trace of fear or anger on her face.

Thirty minutes later…

“So I told them—even if we could temporarily benefit from such improper means, it would damage our trust. And that, I believe, is what the Magical Kingdom should fear most.”

“Whoaaa! That must’ve taken some serious courage, huh?”

“But in the world we live in, it’s not always the righteous who are victorious. They used their position to gradually undermine my allies, and at our final meeting, I was surrounded by only enemies.”

“For real?! That sucks!”

“As a result, I was driven from my leadership position, chased away to the boondocks of the magical-girl management division, and now I have nothing to do with researching enhanced magic…”

“But there’s been some good things, too, huh?”

“What good things could there possibly be?”

“You got to meet cute li’l Tot Pop, didn’t ya?”

"…Hmph, foolishness." The old man bent over, leaning on his staff. He knew perfectly well that he wasn't as surly as he sounded. "Which reminds me—why was it you've come here?"

"To get you to tell me Magical Daisy's current address."

The old man cast a brief spell and gave his staff a little wave. A slip of paper popped out of thin air and fluttered down, and the girl shot her hand out to catch it.

"Her address is written here. Take this."

"Great!"

"Hmph. Don't get the wrong idea. I only told you because you went through the proper procedures."

"Thanks, dude! I owe ya one!"

The girl vanished from the room, and the old man stretched out his back and knees and leaned into his chair.

It was true that she'd gone through the proper procedures. But still, he'd never meant to speak with a magical girl of all people. The old man couldn't stand them. He looked down on them as the lowest of creatures.

So then why had he continued to talk with her? It had been a completely unnecessary idle conversation. And after having enjoyed his first inconsequential chitchat in a long time, mysteriously, he'd come to figure it was okay to tell her the address. His hatred and discriminatory attitude toward magical girls had faded.

He didn't think she'd cast any magic on him. So then why had his feelings changed so much in such a short period of time? He didn't understand it. The old man stroked his beard under the illumination of the magic sigils.

When Kiku Yakumo got back home, there was a magical-girl visitor there.

"Hiya! Nice to meetcha! The good-for-nothin' magical girl named Tot Pop has arrived!"

"Huh? Um, huh? Wh-what?"

When a hand extended toward her, Kiku absently returned the handshake. She was confused. Of course she was confused. She'd gone to class at the university, then transported a bunch of super-heavy packages of dried food at her part-time factory job, then just

barely made it to the public bath right before closing to wash off her sweat before finally transforming into a magical girl to protect the local public order—specifically, pick up garbage around the children's park.

After coming home completely exhausted, she'd figured now she'd collapse into her futon and sleep, but then for some reason, the door to her shabby apartment had been unlocked. *I couldn't have left without locking it…but then again, do I even have anything in here worth stealing?* she wondered, and when she opened the door, sitting on her knees on the tatami rug with her guitar beside her was what looked like a member of some punk band.

Of course this would confuse Kiku.

"Huh? A magical girl? How did you get in here?"

"I got the management division to tell me your address."

"No, that's not what I mean. The door was locked, wasn't it?"

"I talked to the landlady, and she had no problem opening it for me. I didn't do anything violent, so don't worry."

"Don't worry? Don't be ridi—"

"So you're Magical Daisy, right?"

"Oh, yes."

Kiku closed the door behind her and transformed. In her right hand was her magic rod; at her waist, a flower decoration; and with a skirt that fell ten inches above the knee, the girl who'd once been made into an anime—

"Oooh! It's really Magical Daisy! That's crazy! And hey, that rhymes!"

The girl took Daisy's hand and shook it hard up and down. Daisy smiled softly even though she was aware this girl was letting herself get swept away by her excitement. They said there was a tax for fame. Get made into an anime, and you got fans. If you had a lot of fans, then you'd get that many more weirdos among them, too. Anyway, it should probably be okay to just give her an autograph or take a photo together and then quickly send her home.

"So then, um…Tot Pop, was it? What did you come here for today?"

Tot Pop released Daisy's hand and then fell prostrate on the tatami. She moved so smoothly that Daisy couldn't stop her, and despite the girl's quirky mannerisms, she might actually be pure Japanese. If she wasn't, then would she be capable of doing such a fine kowtow on the floor?

“Please! I want you to join up with me to start a band!”

“…Huh?”

Still prostrating herself on the floor, Tot Pop lifted her head. There was an imprint from the tatami on her forehead, and her cheeks were flushed. “Just the other day, I was blessed with the opportunity to see the *Magical Daisy* DVDs.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“The opening theme knocked me out! I couldn’t believe there was such an amazing theme song! A revolutionary anime song! *Miracle! Logical!* And together with Magical Daisy, its creator, I’ll definitely be able to make a wonderful song! I’m sure of it!”

Magical Daisy put a hand to the back of her head awkwardly and looked down at Tot Pop apologetically. “I wasn’t the one who made the opening theme, though.”

“Huh? For real?”

“Yes, for real.”

“Then I’d like you to introduce me to who did.”

“It’s not like that’s under my discretion… Please try asking the management division one more time.”

“If I go back to the Magical Kingdom to have them look into things again, then I’ll definitely tick that old man off, no doubt about it.”

“Still, I can’t…”

Thirty minutes later…

“And then the deadly Daisy Beam!”

“So cool! You’re the best, Daisy!”

“Oh, but though I call it deadly, I don’t aim it at people, you know!”

“You’re so kind, Daisy! Such a humanitarian! The modern Mother Teresa!”

“And so I somehow resolved the incident.”

“Man, that’s surprising. I never woulda imagined there was secrets like that behind the scenes of episode seventeen of *Magical Daisy*.”

“It’s not such a big deal I’d call it secrets behind the scenes, though.” Magical Daisy wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. In the tiny apartment, she’d even acted out some events for

her story, so she was sweating now. If the neighbors hadn't been out, they certainly would have been banging on the walls.

With Tot Pop applauding her, Magical Daisy was enveloped by a comfortable sense of exhaustion when she suddenly remembered. "Oh yeah, so why did you come here again, Tot Pop?"

"I want you to tell me who made the opening theme for *Magical Daisy*."

Now she remembered having talked about something like that. She'd gotten so into the story, she'd forgotten.

She looked at Tot Pop, sitting properly on her knees on the tatami. Her eyes were sparkling bright under the cheap fluorescent lighting. And it wasn't just her appearance that was bright—she didn't seem like a bad person anyway.

If she's not a bad person, then why not?

Magical Daisy ripped a page out of her university notebook and wrote a number on it. "Please don't ask them for anything too unreasonable."

"Whoo! Thanks! You're the best, Daisy! Love ya!"

The moment Tot Pop got the paper, she dashed out the door like a gale. Daisy closed the door and smiled a little. Palette would surely also be surprised by Tot Pop's sudden visit. As she went to contact Palette about Tot Pop's impending arrival, she figured she'd try giving them a call for the first time in a while, too.

"So then why have you come here?"

"Well, uh, I've been going around from place to place, and now I'm here," the magical girl Tot Pop said as she began to count on one hand, sticking out one finger after another. She was probably trying to sound perfectly logical.

"First, at the management division, I asked for Daisy's address and went to her place. Then I went to see her mascot, Palette, who Daisy introduced me to. But Palette told me the melody had been outsourced to a mascot friend who seemed like he could compose something. And the one it had been outsourced to was a digital fairy mascot named Fav, who I figured had to be some kinda Vocaloid-like songstress-ish thing, but he said no, too. He said he asked a magical girl named Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, to

compose the song."

"And now you're here." The girl struck the heel of her boot on the floor. They were in an abandoned building with no one else aside from the two magical girls, so the sound was particularly resonant.

Cranberry could clearly see why Fav had sent this character to her. The digital fairy would manage projects that he liked but would avoid hassles with extreme prejudice.

"So I'm sure Fav told me the one who composed the opening theme of *Magical Daisy* was Cranberry, Musician of the Forest. He said that although it was made to say that he did it, he just put his name on it, and he made you do all the work."

Cranberry smirked, and the rose on her shoulder swayed. Golden pollen scattered, then disappeared. "I did indeed undertake such a job."

"Ohhh! That's great! So they don't call you the musician for nothing!"

Looking out the window, Cranberry saw snow dotting the landscape. The tops of the tall cedars were faintly white. The endless woods of cedar would be covered in a blanket of snowfall before long.

She wasn't fond of noisy guests. There was no one but the two of them in this abandoned building in the middle of the chilly wilderness. Cranberry started to think it would be faster to silence her using the violent methods she was so good at but immediately reconsidered. If this girl had come all the way from the management division, then her disappearance would be rather conspicuous.

In other words, though it was regrettable, there was nothing for it but to have a discussion with her to make her say good-bye.

Although this sort of thing is supposed to be Fav's job.

Cranberry looked away from the window. Concealing her inner thoughts, never letting her bright smile crumble, she turned back to Tot Pop, slightly daunted by the look on the girl's face, like her heart was swelling with anticipation.

Thirty minutes later…

"Oh-ho. I didn't know such magical girls existed."

“My master’s a scout, so I’ve got lots of stories of weird magical girls.”

“Speaking of which, I once turned a whole family into magical girls.”

“Wow, that’s amazing! How’d that go?”

Another thirty minutes later…

“I was told it would be no overstatement to say she had perfected a sort of long-distance type.”

“But then doesn’t that mean a jack-of-all-trades is even better, in the end?”

“It seems they came to the conclusion that when evaluating based on the assumption that they will operate as a team, you should look at more than just individual capability. My thoughts on the matter differ somewhat, however.”

“So what d’you mean by that, basically?”

One hour later…

“So then in theory, that versatility results in omnipotence.”

“Whaaat? I’m not totally convinced.”

“What part isn’t convincing?”

“I mean, fighting that would be super boring, right?”

“Yes, that’s exactly it. So in short, what we’re seeking—”

“Hold on there, pon.”

It wasn’t that her magical phone had spoken. It was the black-and-white sphere that had emerged from its screen—Fav, the digital fairy. Cranberry had known Fav for a long time, so she could tell if Fav was in a good or bad mood from his synthetic voice. And right now, Fav was in a bad mood.

“What’s wrong, Fav? Is there some kind of problem?” asked Cranberry.

“How long are you going to be chatting, pon?”

“This isn’t something you could designate a particular length to.”

“Yeah, yeah!” Tot Pop agreed. “The more wrapped up in talking you get, the more time you need, right?”

“It really is hopeless when women talk on and on, pon…”

Changing subjects from one thing to the next, since each and every one of those topics had been deeply interesting, Cranberry had gotten lost in the conversation. If the time displayed on her magical phone now was correct, then two hours had passed since their chat began.

Despite that disparagement about women talking on or whatnot, Cranberry was not the type to enjoy small talk. She preferred to get up and move. Yet, without even realizing it, she'd been pulled into this conversation. The girl had led the discussion in a direction pleasing to Cranberry while also being very knowledgeable on the topic herself.

"Then there's no helping it, is there?" said Cranberry.

"There's no helping what, pon?"

"Yep, yep. No helping it, no way no how."

"You be quiet for a minute, pon. Come on, hurry up and get out your magical phone." The red light flashed, and Fav swiftly completed the data transfer. "Cranberry's busy, so she can't be in a band or do musical activities, pon. I've transferred to you information about magical girls who seem like they could join you in whatever it is you want to do, so go visit them instead, pon."

"But I think it'd be nice to make music with Miss Cranberry here."

"What a pest, pon! I'm telling you to get lost already, pon!"

While watching the two quarreling out of the corner of her eye, Cranberry touched her finger to her chin and tried imagining herself singing and dancing with Tot Pop. She thought that wouldn't be so bad—which came as a total surprise to her.

◇◇◇

When having a secret talk, naturally, people lower their voices. The place was a run-down apartment on the outskirts of S City, and inside were members of an antiestablishment group. They were discussing robbing a bank in order to acquire funds and such, so their voices got even lower and quieter.

"We steal the money, then run immediately."

"That's simple and easy to get, huh?"

"Do we use a car?"

"We're magical girls, so it'd be best to run, right?"

In the small apartment scattered with personal effects, the four magical girls leaned their foreheads close around a small wooden table to converse quietly. These girls were going for the outlaw feel of an antiestablishment faction, but since they were all wearing magical-girl costumes, they didn't quite nail the execution. Neither did the environment—the slab of squared lumber leaning against the wall and the helmet hanging off it seemed weirdly out of place.

But the one thing fitting with their intended outlaw vibe was the gas masks they all wore. It made it difficult to talk and hard to hear, and the room wasn't furnished with anything appropriate for a confidential discussion, but an antiestablishment faction would value atmosphere the most.

"We know there's a connection between that bank and the Magical Kingdom, right?"

"Of course we do. I've done all the proper research."

"It's nice that this isn't just about getting us funds, huh?"

"So then about how exactly we're gonna do this…"

Right when they were about to get deeper into things, the door buzzer rang. All eyes shifted to the monitor on the wall of the room to see a girl standing there. At a glance, she looked like a punk rocker or something with the guitar she was holding.

"…Who's that?"

"A magical girl, right?"

"Is she someone you guys know?"

"I dunno her."

"Maybe the Magical Kingdom sent over an investigator…or something?"

"Or an assassin to finish us off."

All of them went dead silent, gazing at the screen. With no idea that she was suspected of being an assassin or an investigator, the girl on the screen was smiling peacefully.

The girls in gas masks turned to one another.

"Suspicious…"

"Sketchy, huh."

"Shouldn't we turn tail, for now?"

"Everyone who agrees—"

Suddenly there came two sounds loud enough to make anyone want to plug their ears. The first was from the impact of a door violently banging open, and the second was the ricochet of the door against the wall from being opened with such violent methods.

Panicking and going into fighting stances, they all faced the girl who stood there, holding up her guitar.

“Hiii! I’m everyone’s friend, the cutie Tot Pop! Let’s make a band together! Hey!”

Thirty minutes later…

Tot Pop, standing on the bed, thrust a fist up in the air, and the four girls in gas masks followed suit.

“We’re gonna make this a success! Bank robbery! Revolution for the Magical Kingdom!”

“Whoo!”

“We’re gonna do this!”

“I’ll follow you anywhere, Boss!”

“Hooray for Tot Pop! Glory to the resistance!”

Since We Want to Beat the Archfiend

This story is set a while before the *Magical Girl Raising Project* game first started.

Since We Want to Beat the Archfiend

The Archfiend Pam Investigation Team had been formed in order to successfully beat the Archfiend—a goal no one had ever accomplished before. However, nobody except for their ringleader, the digital fairy Fav, knew the team's true purpose.

Fav sought to make his favorite magical girl, Cranberry, an examiner for magical-girl exams, and beating the Archfiend was for that purpose.

Normally, only veteran magical girls could be examiners. A newbie would never earn the post simply by being brilliant. Fav could make recommendations for new examiners, but no one would listen if you suggested a newbie. In order to break new ground and appoint a newbie as an examiner, she would need a commensurate spectacular achievement.

And that achievement was beating the Archfiend. But though they were calling it "beating the Archfiend," the goal here was not killing her or overpowering her. Getting in one hit would be enough.

Archfiend Pam was famously powerful and could boast of combat exploits so grand that rumor had it not even one or two hundred strong could bring her down. She guided and encouraged those magical girls who were drawn by her strength, leading them to greater heights.

The popular name for that group was the Archfiend Cram School, and people said it was the first place to go for magical girls hungry for power and might. Though it was a private organization, it had become a sort of independent cooperative body. There were those in the upper ranks who saw it as dangerous, wondering if it was okay for this battle force to be consolidated in one place like that. But the Department of Diplomacy, of which Pam was a member, wrote the matter off—"It's an extracurricular activity, so it's no problem!"—which quelled any further comments about it.

And on that day, as usual, the girls were pursuing strength and rejoicing in their youth.

There were two ways to graduate from the Archfiend Cram School.

One was to be acknowledged by the leader of the school, Archfiend Pam.

The other was to land an attack on her.

Accomplish either of these, and you would officially graduate. With the honor of an Archfiend Cram School alum in your heart, you would enter the workforce in high demand and secure the position of a career magical girl—a salaried one, at that.

There had been more than ten graduates since the Archfiend Cram School had become what it was now. However, not a single one of them had managed to graduate by landing an attack on Archfiend Pam. The graduates were all those who had been acknowledged by her. Put that another way, and they had all been incapable of beating her… These students had hung their heads, resigned in the face of the overwhelming obstacle that was Archfiend Pam.

Fav thought that maybe Cranberry could do it. If she were to combine her survival skills, physical abilities, and magic, then perhaps she could get a hit on Archfiend Pam and graduate.

To that end, Fav had used his connections and sent Cranberry into the Archfiend Cram School. Of course, he didn't want her to work at things diligently and wait for the Archfiend to acknowledge her to graduate. Fav hated waiting around. He wanted Cranberry to be made an examiner as quickly as possible. She had to become an examiner, or there'd be no point in him having set his eye on her. He would spare no effort supporting her in this regard.

And so he had sent in a secret agent. Though the digital fairy–type mascots were given artificial personalities through magic, they weren't actually alive. They didn't breathe, they had no heartbeat, no body heat or sweat, and they couldn't even make a wobble in the air.

Since Fav was a high-grade mascot for the use of masters, he couldn't leave his supervisor phone. And as such, he had a lot of authority. Fav could summon the other digital fairy–type mascots—with the FA series at the top of the list—and send them into action. Some, he blackmailed; others owed him favors; still others he lured in with the promise of a reward. Fav had mobilized all his

connections to dispatch digital fairies to the magical phones of the girls studying under Archfiend Pam.

Fav did not put magical girls on a pedestal. They were all quite human. Deep down, even the cruelest or most self-sacrificing of magical girls worried whether they looked cool.

Even Archfiend Pam—flattered and celebrated as the strongest warrior, a living legend, a magical girl capable of mass destruction—was originally just a human. Even if she didn't have any blatant secrets like corruption, then she should have something—an embarrassing hobby, a unique fetish, something nasty she'd done in the past, maybe some sort of illicit collection. In the unlikely event that Fav couldn't dig up any dirt on Pam, then he would sneak some in. There was something to be learned from the way corrupt cops did things, sneaking drugs into a bag that would be investigated before questioning someone.

Here in the supervisor magical phone that was Fav's territory, there was one saved file—a video that contained the entirety of the investigation team's research on Archfiend Pam.

Fav dived deep into the magical phone and played the video. There was a pathetic fanfare and morning sun shining in the blue sky, and the characters Archfiend Pam and the Happy Friends appeared in a thick red font, and then the screen went black.

What is this?

Had they made this into a story or something? Of course, Fav couldn't recall ever having made such a request. So this meant the creator had done this of their own accord, as a bonus. There were rather a lot of mascot characters who would try too hard to please and lose sight of the original goal.

The scene changed, and Fav got focused. He wouldn't overlook so much as a speck of dust from here on out.

The screen displayed a magical girl.

She wore a very skimpy bikini-style costume with four wings at her back and two black horns on her head. This was Archfiend Pam. The camera was at a low angle, so you couldn't see her expression. Fav didn't even know what was going on right now. He'd always thought hers was an abnormally raunchy costume, but from this

angle, her boobs jiggled with every step she took. He felt like he was about to get a glimpse of something he shouldn't be seeing.

Despite preaching high morals, the Magical Kingdom let magical girls wear getups like this. *Is this not a problem?* Fav wondered, privately indignant.

The screen showed movement. The frame shook, and the image blurred. He didn't know what was going on, and the intense sounds and movements made him feel almost drunk. There were screams, then sounds of a clash. He heard a synthetic voice say, *"Archfiend time: her routine morning walk. Someone barged into her moment of total peace."* Fav wondered who the speaker was; he figured they were the narrator.

The narrator continued its explanation: *"If you want to graduate from the Archfiend School before completing the training period, you must land an attack on Archfiend Pam. There still has yet to be any graduate who has achieved that honor."*

Archfiend Pam kicked, punched, and beat the attacker badly. Then she dragged her up from facedown on the ground and slapped her on both cheeks, too. As the magical girl looked like she would cry, Pam lambasted her, saying, "At this point, you should have done this," and "This was where you were weak." She was like an ogre or a demon.

It looked like they were in a park somewhere in the Magical Kingdom, and a robed old man was sitting on a bench watching them with a smile. Apparently, this wasn't a rare event. Archfiend Pam bowed to the old man, saying, "I apologize for the disturbance," and then she made the magical girl who was on the verge of tears bow her head, too.

"And now let's probe deeper into the secrets of the Archfiend."

The scene shifted.

"All documents submitted to the Department of Diplomacy must be made according to regulation format. No exceptions, even for Archfiend Pam."

Archfiend Pam was sitting in front of a laptop. It looked like she was working on a future training plan, but her typing was dubious. She was typing one letter at a time with the index finger of each hand, and yet still she occasionally screwed up, crying things like "Ahhh!" and "Not that one!" and stopping with remarks like "How do you erase this?" and "To go back to the previous page…" She

was not making any progress.

The scene shifted.

"Changing a magical girl's name is a real hassle. But the Archfiend does not see such matters as an issue. She must think that it's important for students of the Archfiend Cram School to be given worthy names."

She was reading some kind of document. It seemed to be a roster. It was enumerated with what looked like the names of magical girls.

Lake of Fire Flame Flamey, Dark Fang Limit, Azure Dragon Panas, Flower-Seller Marika Fukuroi, Twin Stars Cutie Altair, and then at the end, there was Cranberry's name.

Archfiend Pam spent a while spinning a pencil in her right hand. Around the thirtieth spin, she stopped it flat, and then added *Musician of the Forest* to Cranberry's name and nodded with satisfaction.

Fav immediately went to search the magical-girl registry. It no longer said Cranberry, but Musician of the Forest, Cranberry. The time of the change was a few days earlier. That was right after she'd entered the Archfiend School. It really had been changed. Just what was the point of that?

The scene shifted.

"A magical girl of a relatively high position must be able to make covert contact with her subordinates. Deemed necessary for that purpose, the magical phones were developed five years ago."

The camera stared down over what looked like a meeting room, on a magical phone on a long table. A shrill alarm was ringing from the phone. Archfiend Pam didn't cancel the noise, merely looked down at it silently, then muttered, "How do I stop it?"

How had she wound up in a situation where the alarm was ringing in the first place?

The scene shifted.

"The magical phones are wonderful items—through the installation of applications appropriate to the individual's professional duties, they can be highly versatile. However, some magical girls are still unused to their presence."

Archfiend Pam was staring down at the magical phone on the

long table. There was a fist shape clearly dented into the screen of the phone, and it had been so badly smashed, it was impressive. The alarm was no longer ringing. Though any other functions were probably gone now, too.

The scene shifted.

"In the Archfiend Cram School, mock battles are just like real combat. They're so intense that everyone assumes people will get injured. All this is based on Archfiend Pam's philosophy that strength is honed on the battlefield."

This time, it was a scene of training. The participants appeared to be engaged in a mock battle, using a deserted house standing alone in a wild plain and separated into teams of offensive and defensive sides. Fireballs, light beams, and magical girls flew every which way.

There was a pretty serious battle going on, and not too far off in the distance, you could see Archfiend Pam with her arms crossed. But something about her seemed amiss. She wouldn't settle down. She was kind of fidgety, folding her arms the other way, then sighing. Her antsy gestures increased in frequency and speed, and then, reaching the peak, Pam leaped toward the abandoned building.

Fav was probably imagining that she'd yelled, "Let me join!"

The scene shifted.

"A computer is necessary for the submission of documents within the Department of Diplomacy, but handwritten documents are allowed when submitting a written apology to other departments."

Archfiend Pam was facing a stack of papers. She was writing something to apply for a new magical phone. She'd filled out the lines for name and organization, but her pen was stopped on the line for the reason it had broken. Fav thought it was unnecessary to be totally honest there, though.

In the end, even when writing by hand, she was still having difficulties.

The scene shifted.

"The Archfiend always demands a clear explanation, but there aren't very many magical girls who can always give a clear

explanation."

Magical phone in hand, Archfiend Pam was now facing a laptop. It seemed a new magical phone had safely reached her.

"It suddenly stopped converting text into Japanese characters. No, I didn't particularly do anything odd. I was using it like I always do. *Cap-slock?* Just give it to me straight. I can't understand your technical jargon. Oh, and take care of the new magical phone's settings for me, too. Make the ringtone for emergencies the same as before."

It seemed someone on the phone was giving her instructions, but things weren't going like she wanted.

The scene shifted.

"The Archfiend never forgets her work, even when enjoying reading in her free time. Her diligence is an example for all to follow."

The location had to be her private room. She was sitting on a chair, reading. The camera captured a large bookshelf that towered in one corner of the room. It featured rows of books on myths, legends, and stories of the human world. Next, the camera showed the book Archfiend Pam was reading. It was the Bible. However, she didn't seem so religious that she'd read the Bible in her downtime. She was occasionally taking notes as she muttered things like, "I can use this term" and "I'll make it sound cooler later."

The scene shifted.

"The Archfiend always demands a clear explanation, but there aren't very many computers that can always give a clear explanation."

She was holding her head in front of a blue-screened, totally nonresponsive laptop. It looked like it had finally broken.

The scene shifted.

"She also goes to meetings. These days, a lot of mages will scowl at you simply for being a magical girl, but it seems her reception with the upper ranks isn't so bad."

Apparently, they were having a meeting; the room was full of important-looking people. The old man who appeared to be leading things was going on at length about something that seemed quite boring. Archfiend Pam was not among the participants. Fav was wondering exactly what was going on here when Pam walked in

with a tray of steaming teacups and went around serving everyone in the room. She wore a gentle smile that was completely different from her look when training. *I see—so that expression's just another magical-girl thing.* Eventually, the meeting went to a vote, and tray still in hand, Pam raised her hand in agreement. Was she taking on a service role when she was a member of this meeting?

The scene shifted.

"Now without a laptop, she couldn't do her work. So in her determination to obtain a new work computer, the Archfiend headed to an experimental facility."

There were stickers that said *secret* stuck all over the place, walls and doors included, while unknown organisms writhed in cultivation tanks and thick cables extended everywhere.

Fav could never forget this peculiar atmosphere. New products were developed every day in this experimental facility. This place was also where the digital fairy–type mascots were born.

Archfiend Pam—dressed in an incredibly suspicious getup of a black dress coat, khaki scarf, Panama hat, and sunglasses—was examining the rows of mysterious apparatuses. A magical girl in a gray workman's jumper was explaining them with a rather proud look.

It seemed Pam had given up on acquiring legitimate equipment via letter of apology and was trying to get an acquaintance to share illegitimate equipment from the experimental facility. But wouldn't that be even more of a hassle?

The scene shifted.

"Having successfully acquired the item she was after, the Archfiend returned. Now she should be able to manage her work flawlessly, starting tomorrow."

She ripped open the sigil-stamped cardboard box, and cardboard scraps fluttered through the air. What appeared from within was—quite clearly—a microwave.

Hadn't she gone to get something to replace the laptop? The woman in question was reading the microwave manual with a baffled expression. It was dubious just how much of it she understood.

Pausing the video, Fav rose up out of the magical phone. Of course, nothing had changed since he'd started watching it. He was still in Cranberry's room.

Looking around from atop Cranberry's bed, he saw there was no furniture. The bare concrete room was bleak—very much like Cranberry herself.

There were many things Fav wanted to say to the creator of this video, but leaving that aside, now he knew Archfiend Pam's weakness. If they took advantage of that, surely Cranberry would win.

Fav came up with a scheme, which he discussed with Cranberry.

"So that's the plan I came up with, pon."

"I see. I think that might just work."

"…You're not going to say something like, *'Fighting a battle with schemes is weak,'* pon?"

"She's given us the unreasonable order of coming up with finishing move names that sound cool in both English and Japanese. It's become rather too much of a hassle. If we can resolve this quickly, then I won't oppose your plan."

It seemed on her end, Cranberry was suffering, too.

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Three days later, Fav was on the bed watching a new video.

"The students of the Archfiend Cram School are allowed to challenge the Archfiend at any time."

White clouds passed through the sky, which was dotted with several birds. In a vast wasteland that stretched to the horizon, just over ten magical girls could be seen, and of them, Archfiend Pam and Cranberry were facing off, standing five and a half yards apart. Pam crouched low, bringing both hands in front of her, while Cranberry was standing casually with no affectation.

Without warning, Cranberry leaped into action. She covertly generated a sound wave, which Pam blocked with one of her wings before transforming it into a screw shape for a counterattack. Cranberry knocked aside the spinning blade with her right arm, slamming it down. Everyone in the gallery gasped.

Sound and wings clashed, evaded, and struck, and Cranberry

kicked from a back-to-back position. The struggle went back and forth at a bewildering rate, attacking while defending. They jumped into the air, their heels scattering dirt and grass. Tension hung over the onlookers' faces when the camera switched to them.

Only a split second had passed from when Cranberry had first attacked. She and Pam had to be exchanging blows at a speed that was difficult even for magical girls strong enough to train with the Archfiend Cram School to see. Now Fav thanked the consideration of the creator who had nonchalantly slowed down the play speed for the fight scenes.

At this point, the narration came in. *"Those students who assumed this was just a reckless newbie challenging the Archfiend were forced to revise their assumptions. The Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, possesses physical abilities beyond those of a rookie."*

Tentacles and arms crossed, ripping through the wasteland. A black wing buckled, and blood spurted from Cranberry's forehead. One of the audience members, a girl in a red dress, smothered a shriek.

"But even so, Cranberry does not fall."

Her cheeks slowly rising, Archfiend Pam smiled, and at the same time, the three wings that had been protecting her back moved.

"Unease runs through the students. Archfiend Pam was going to use all her wings against a newbie magical girl who'd only recently joined the school. This had never happened before in the long history of the Archfiend Cram School."

Cranberry dashed forward, and the moment when Archfiend Pam reacted, about to send her wings into action—

—a grating tone buzzed from the Archfiend's magical phone. It was the emergency ring.

Archfiend Pam paused and held her hand up to Cranberry, indicating that she stop. Cranberry shrugged like she was disappointed and relaxed her stance. Pam then grabbed the magical phone hanging from her waist—and Cranberry moved. In one leap, she closed the distance, sending out her fist.

It was a surprise attack; Cranberry had merely pretended to pause the fight. Her shift from lax to tense was frighteningly swift. This move wasn't something a regular magical girl could handle. Cranberry's opponent wasn't a regular magical girl, but even so, Pam would not be able to block it entirely.

The magical phone hit the ground with a clunk.

Archfiend Pam grabbed Cranberry's clenched fist within only a hairbreadth of her face. In the same instant, a tentacle-like whip extended from her black wing and wrapped around Cranberry's arm. But Cranberry didn't try to dodge it—there was a light *smack* and Archfiend Pam was blasted backward. Right hand raised, Cranberry fell faceup onto the ground.

"That's Cranberry's magic. Sound moves through more than just air —It can also travel through objects. By making the Archfiend touch her fist and generating a destructive sound wave, she sent a shock passing through her body."

Fav mentally oohed. When Cranberry used her magic to attack an opponent with sound, distance and force operated inversely. The farther away she was, the weaker the damage she could incur upon the enemy, and the closer she got, the stronger it was. After all, sound travels as a wave, and its passage through air would dampen it.

So if it didn't pass through air, then what else could it pass through?

If she were to make contact with her opponent to send the wave directly to them through her own body, then its effects would be immense. They wouldn't be able to react or defend themselves. But she had to have a firm and solid surface of contact with the opponent, and since it would hurt herself, too, this method couldn't be used casually. But as long as it could work on the Archfiend as a one-time ace up her sleeve, that was enough.

The magical girls observing the spectacle were collectively holding their breath. Springing up from a backward arch, Archfiend Pam got back to her feet and rubbed her left arm, which was now limp all the way down to her fingertips. Her nails were dyed red, and two droplets of blood dripped from the ends of her fingers. An attack like that was powerful enough to break bone or tear muscle, but the fact that Pam got away with only minor damage was just plain annoying.

Then with her toe, Pam kicked up the magical phone that had fallen on the ground. It flew into the air, and she caught it with a black wing. The display was blank.

The narration started up again. *"Archfiend Pam only gets an emergency call if there's a world or two in crisis. Even if she is the great Archfiend, she won't be able to stay calm if something that big has*

happened. So Cranberry used her magic to generate the sound of Pam's emergency ring, taking advantage of the Archfiend's distraction to make contact. The Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, is fearsome indeed."

Archfiend Pam extended her right hand, then drew it back, offering her injured left hand instead. Cranberry's right hand had been severely damaged by her own sound wave, its skin torn and bone poking out. Fav groaned at how painful at looked, but the magical girls of the Archfiend Cram School didn't seem to see it as a problem.

The two magical girls exchanged a firm handshake and embraced each other.

"Thank you."

"I acknowledge your graduation. But don't make this the end, Musician of the Forest, Cranberry. Next time, come for pleasure. I'll be waiting—anytime."

One of the magical girls watching whooped for joy. More followed, one after another, and they surged toward Cranberry, mobbing her. They all extolled the newbie who had beaten the Archfiend, and even Pam herself, who never let her severe expression crumble when in training, was wearing a smile.

The video slowed down before stopping completely and then faded into black and white. The narration continued.

"Having produced a new candidate for Archfiend named Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, the Archfiend Cram School will flourish even further. The clutches of evil are reaching everywhere—yes, even right behind you."

A strangely cheery ending theme that clashed with the narration played. Fav felt like there had been some poor communication in the production of this video. The word "Fin" appeared in the bottom-right corner of the screen, and then it went dark.

Now the Archfiend Investigation Team's job was complete. Fav would erase all the evidence and leave no records. With a celebratory chat on IRC to finish it all off, all would be made as if it had never happened.

Fav's thoughts had already flown to the final chat. He made up his mind to start it off by dressing down whoever had put in that narration.

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Being bad with technology, she had to bring all of her strength to bear just to deal with a single magical phone. And if the situation was an emergency, then all the more so. Fav's plan had gone well, and as a result, Cranberry had accomplished the fastest possible graduation from the Archfiend Cram School. Through this great undertaking, they had won great notoriety for the Musician of the Forest—enough that it wouldn't be unnatural for her to be recommended as an examiner, despite being a newbie.

A few days later, Fav asked Cranberry a question. "You didn't want to stay in the Archfiend Cram School, pon?"

"It was an amusing place, but…"

"Yeah, you did seem like you were having fun, pon."

"It seemed it would be even more fun to be with you."

"Oh-ho…could this be a proposal, pon?"

Cranberry slowly shook her head, and the roses on her shoulders swayed left to right. In this small room of bare concrete—this stark chamber with only a single plain bed—the incongruous aroma of roses hung in the air.

Rainbow Friendship

This story is set shortly before *Magical Girl Raising Project limited*.

Rainbow Friendship

She couldn't avoid the high turn kick.

She couldn't generate her rainbows. In other words, she couldn't use a rainbow to block the attack. In desperation, she held her arm up to the side of her face. That wouldn't be enough to fully stop the strike that meant to slice off her head, and she was flung backward, guard and all.

Her back smashed through a cement-block wall, not stopping even then, and she rolled over the concrete. If she could just deploy a rainbow, she would have been able to guard or strike back. She could have avoided this clumsy rolling around by using a rainbow to support her body. But now, she couldn't even manage what she was usually able to do so easily.

Come out! Fire! But no matter how many times she silently prayed, the rainbows would not come. In the utter darkness, she couldn't even see herself. But still, if her rainbows came, she'd know. Of course, she also knew that they weren't coming.

Sensing a shuddering of the air and a falling sound, she bent her back to curl up.

Something passed by where her head had been until an instant ago, striking the surface of the concrete. Shards scattered, hitting her face. She reached her hand out to the thing that had caused the impact, but it slipped away from her. The presence melted into the darkness. She couldn't hear a sound, either.

She just felt a gaze. Her opponent was watching her, unseen.

Come at me one more time. Come, and this time for sure, I'll catch you.

She pushed herself off the ground with deliberate slowness. If the enemy took this as her opportunity for a big attack, her movements would become comparatively easier to read. Rain Pow simply had to catch her. Even completely blinded, if Rain Pow could get her in a grapple, then the odds would be fifty-fifty.

But the enemy must have anticipated that idea of hers, as she made no move. She was experienced. She knew Rain Pow's magic and the way she fought using her magic. That kind of opponent was the scariest.

As a darkness user, this enemy robbed the area of all light. Magic rainbows couldn't exist within the darkness, either. To Rain Pow, being unable to generate rainbows was like having both her weapon and her armor stolen away.

Though her opponent wasn't running away, Rain Pow couldn't sense her presence at all. She could only feel like she wasn't there. In the complete darkness, unable to see a thing, there was only one sense she could rely on. She felt as if the darkness was gradually oozing into her skin. Just standing there consumed energy.

Something flew at her. Probably a throwing stone. This, she could avoid. Even if the enemy was a master of battles in darkness, she couldn't erase the sound of a throwing stone.

Rain Pow dodged it, and then right as she was trying to deduce where it had been thrown from, another stone shot at her from a different direction. She dodged that one, too, then yet another, and when the next two stones came flying at the same time, she avoided them, too—or not.

The two stones were connected by a string…like some kind of wire between them. It was made like a throwing weapon for capturing live animals. The moment after she was distracted by the wire winding around her upper arms and torso, a shrill voice ripped through the darkness.

"Here she comes!"

Before Rain Pow could even think about what that cry meant, her feet moved of their own accord. She imagined the enemy attacking, trying to take advantage of her while she was tangled in the wire. Toko had taught her this lesson brutally well—a magical girl's weapon is her imagination. Even in the darkness, her imagination was free.

Rain Pow began to picture this difficult opponent's stance, build, timing, and position along with where and how she should attack.

She took a firm step with her dominant leg, breaking through the concrete, digging into the earth below that with her toes. Then, with all the power in her body and spirit, she thrust a kick straight backward.

The impact hit the enemy's gut, passing through muscle and organs and penetrating all the way to the spine. All the sensations from the bottom of her foot told Rain Pow that her imagination had made no mistake. She ripped through flesh, broke bones, and tore into organs.

The enemy tried to grab her kicking leg, but she was too weak, now. Blood vomit overflowed from the back of her opponent's throat, and she slid down on the spot. When Rain Pow heard her collapsing onto the concrete, she finally brought back her leg.

The magical darkness that had filled her vision gradually cleared. When she had been in the darkness, it had been like being at the bottom of an abyss, but now that it was clear, she was in the sort of ordinary nighttime residential neighborhood you'd find anywhere. The little park in front of the apartment building was illuminated by streetlamps so glaringly bright, they were irritating —perhaps to drive off sketchy people.

She ripped off the wires forcefully. The stones on the ends bounced, rolled, hit the curb, and stopped.

With her toe, she nudged the body of a woman facedown in a puddle of blood, turning her over. The woman had detransformed; she was wearing a school uniform, a short skirt, and her light-dyed hair was in disarray. Despite being in uniform, she was wearing makeup. This was probably what you'd call "gal-style."

It was definitely Rain Pow's target. Setting her foot over the girl's neck, she broke it with a stomp.

"That was a close one!"

A tiny creature came spiraling down from atop a streetlamp; she was so small that you could set her in the palm of your hand. The translucent insect wings on her back made her look just like the fairies in old folktales, and her white silk dress and faintly glowing form really drove the whole fairy thing home. "You'd have been a total goner if I hadn't called out to you, huh?" she said.

"Could you see into the darkness from the outside?"

"Naw, I used a new function on the magical phone, the one where it'll search for people with magical abilities nearby. It's not generally supposed to be used like radar or sonar, but hey, that's how I use it."

"Oh, huh… But, like, do you think it's a coincidence that the target's magic just happened to be the worst match with mine? Think we can chalk it up to bad timing that when I tried to attack

while she was human, she actually turned out to be in magical-girl form?"

"Frankly, I think we can't."

"Cheers to your honesty. This wasn't, like, a trap, was it?"

"If it were a trap, then I think it'd be more trap-like, with more people or something, though…" The fairy's expression went blank for an instant, but her old smile came back right away, and she did a spin in the air. "It might be a good idea to look into that stuff a bit deeper. I'll ask our financier."

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When Toko had first come to this world, she'd thought magical girls were all nothing but idiots.

But there were actually a lot of clever ones out there. There were many wicked magical girls who earned a little on the side by getting their hands dirty with bribery, leaking information, diverting goods to the black market, and various other bad deeds, and Rain Pow had been undertaking jobs to kill such types.

But Rain Pow was no agent of justice. She was a villain among villains, murdering people for pay in order to protect the interests of a certain department within the Magical Kingdom. Most of the people Rain Pow killed were various villains, but there were a fair number of normal folks in there, too. Plus the occasional stubborn blockhead with a strong sense of justice.

That day, Toko had a new proposal for her.

"This line of work is going well right now, but it won't necessarily go well forever… I mean, you can understand that well from what happened the other day, huh? It'd be best to get some insurance."

"Insurance? What kind, specifically?"

"I'm gonna make a bunch of magical girls around here who'll be your backup. It's standard for magical girls to fight as a team, right? Of course, we keep our real work a secret. Involving amateurs would just up the danger, after all. I'll arrange for some allies we can use as a shield and dispose of if the time comes while we get the hell outta here."

"Sheesh, that's hella evil, don'cha think? So you'll be the one searching for these allies, Toko?"

“Yeah, but you have to help out, too, Rain Pow.”

“Sounds like a pain in the ass.” Spreading out both arms, Kaori rolled over on her bed. She was completely exhausted from killing and almost being killed. Even after coming home, she still couldn’t relax.

Kaori wasn’t seeking a relaxed life as a magical girl, but she also didn’t want to live a life of endless tension and thrills, either. She would have fun making money, fooling around, and living a life of pleasure. And she’d work hard to that end. Once middle school was over, she’d stop living in this run-down apartment, and she’d avoid the presence of her older sister whose face she didn’t want to see. Once she was in high school, she’d leave this place and live with Toko to have a more fun life. It wasn’t like Kaori’s sister wanted to see her face, either, so she was sure to be glad about that, too.

Kaori had been given this opportunity to become a magical girl and escape her old shitty life. If her evil deeds were exposed and she got captured by the Magical Kingdom, she’d lose the life she’d made. That was the one thing she absolutely wanted to avoid. She didn’t want to go back to how things were before. Toko’s proposal was very reasonable.

She wasn’t sensitive enough to think, *I can’t make my school friends sacrificial pawns!* All she had inside her was a hard-boiled magical girl who’d say, *The first time I killed someone, maybe I trembled a little; I don’t really remember*. Sacrificing others for her own sake was fundamental to Toko’s philosophy, and Kaori thought she was right.

Still sprawled out in her bed, she asked Toko at her pillow, “What do you want me to do?”

“Come on, it’s not gonna be that much of a hassle.”

Folding fingers one by one, Toko counted off. “I saw five people in the school who had some potential. There’s the question of just how enthusiastic they’ll be when I make the offer, but stupid is as stupid does, so that one idiot will gladly help out, and the moron she drags around will get involved regardless. The selfish one’ll see being a magical girl as beneficial to her, so that one’s in the bag. And if we use the students as a shield when asking the teacher, then no prob there, either. And then there’s the last one.”

“What about the last one?”

“She’s the kind of girl who, like, if you invite her with a smile

and say, *'Let's be magical girls!'* she'll probably run away."

"Would a girl like that even have the potential in the first place?"

"Normally, yes. But there's exceptions to everything." Toko shifted into a formal kneeling position and faced Kaori, putting her hands together. "And so—emergency mission time! Go make friends with that girl!"

"Huh?"

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Toko, the one who had made Kaori into the magical girl Rain Pow, had also taught her all sorts of things. She'd beaten everything into her, even skills she didn't know when she might ever need: how to fight, how to live, foreign languages, even table manners.

But "how to make friends with someone" hadn't been among those things.

"Well, y'know, I've just never needed friends."

"Are you a loner, Toko?"

"I'm proudly independent. I'm an independent fairy. I don't need a posse."

"But you weren't invited to your class reunion, right?"

"I'm committed to doing my best, even as I'm subjected to such slander like, *'If you find any good magical-girl candidates, never ever show them to Toko,'* or *'Don't listen to Toko even if she makes you an offer that sounds good,'* or *'Don't let Toko come within a fifteen-foot radius of you.'* I don't let any of that get good ol' Toko down!"

Kaori didn't quite get why Toko was looking so self-satisfied. Did she mean to say that she wasn't an isolated loner but a proudly independent pariah?

"So, Rain Pow, do your best to become friends with her. In the meantime, I'll be watching the other girls."

"I dunno about this…"

Kaori had never been taught how to make friends, but she wasn't incapable of it. By fine-tuning her grades across every subject and settling into a spot within the class hierarchy, she had put herself in a position that upset neither herself nor anyone else—all while avoiding being the target of envy, jealousy, mockery, or laughter but still not completely invisible. When it came to social

relationships, Kaori was confident she could pull them off better than her teacher Toko.

"Um, so her name was Tatsuko Sakaki…right?" said Kaori. "And she's a first-year, yeah? Which class?"

Toko regarded her with an odd look. "I asked you to do this because she's in your class…"

"Huh? You serious?"

She *was* serious.

When Kaori looked at the class list, the name Tatsuko Sakaki was right there. And Kaori wasn't some shut-in who never came to school—she attended all her classes and participated in various events.

Kaori did not scrimp in her efforts to have a comfortable time at school. She had a firm grasp of the social relationships in the classroom, and she'd made friends based on knowing who felt what about whom. So there was no way there could be anyone in the class, boy or girl, whose name she didn't know…or so she'd thought.

Tatsuko was always alone during break time in class. In middle school, maintaining friends is a lubricant for your lifestyle. If you're alone, you'll stick out from the rest, and it's not unusual for things to escalate into being avoided, shunned, teased, and then bullied.

Tatsuko was alone, and yet she didn't stick out at all. Whether you were someone like Toko, who was generally loathed, or whether you liked to play the aloof loner, or whether you simply had poor communication skills, being alone would make you stand out. You'd be out of place. Being so mindful of her own position, there was no way Kaori wouldn't notice something like that.

But even so, the girl hadn't allowed anyone to notice. Whether she stood out or not wasn't even in question—she had flat-out erased her presence.

Her appearance was unremarkable. Her hair wasn't brushed enough, and the elastic she tied it up with was too plain. She was lacking in curves. Her face was missing a smile, so she was devoid of a middle school girl's charm.

She didn't particularly excel in academics, nor was she bad at them, either. She didn't take the lead in gym and music class, but she also didn't fall behind, instead staying in the middle of the group.

Was she deliberately trying to conceal and bury her true abilities, like Kaori? It was highly unusual for Kaori to not even notice the name of a person in her own class.

In class and during breaks, she found her gaze unwittingly following Tatsuko's every movement. It'd just be weird if she were to stare too much, but when she tried to act as natural as possible, Tatsuko would quickly disappear from Kaori's sight. She was a hassle to deal with in every way.

Tatsuko went to the washroom alone. She ate her boxed lunch alone. When the students moved between classrooms, she was alone yet again. It seemed she was often reading in the library during breaks. She was always alone, and nobody saw that as suspicious.

She wasn't in any clubs, and once she was done with class and cleaning duties, she would head straight home. Kaori tried looking around, wondering if she was friendly with anyone in the class, but there honestly wasn't a single one.

Even if they weren't quite friends, the kids sitting beside her had to have comparatively more contact time with her. With that in mind, when Kaori obliquely asked what they thought of Tatsuko, her efforts were in vain; all she got was, "Eh, she's normal, I guess." *No, she's* not *normal*, she insisted to herself, having gained nothing from her questioning. Tatsuko's gym class stretching partner—who'd only been assigned to her because their names were near each other on the roll call list—also said, "Yeah, she's normal." The student on cleaning duty with Tatsuko agreed: "Yep, just a normal girl."

She wasn't normal, after all. It seemed not a single person was cognizant of Tatsuko as an individual.

When Kaori came back from school, she immediately vented at Toko. "What's with that girl? Does she have a magic barrier?"

"Naw, nothing magical. I'd be able to tell."

"So then what's her deal? She's just naturally like that?"

"Yeah, I think so… A lot of the girls who become magical girls are pretty weird."

"Is that a low-key diss?"

"I'm not dissing you. I totally respect you, dude."

The list of magical-girl candidates Toko had found:

Umi Shibahara. This girl was weird. *Definitely* weird. Kaori had seen her out on the sports field, running and kicking and punching

—that wasn't a human but another kind of creature.

Kayo Nemura. The fact that she could stand to hang around Umi made her weird, too.

Nozomi Himeno. During the school entrance ceremony, Kaori had been confused by why a student would be standing with the teachers. She was shocked to later learn that Nozomi Himeno *was* a teacher. Being like a magical girl even before transformation? Weird.

Mine Musubiya. This was the one person Kaori didn't really know. According to Toko's investigation, she'd consistently been class rep ever since elementary school, so she was probably a weirdo herself.

And then Tatsuko Sakaki. Kaori thought she'd been more attentive to life at school than anyone, so it was weird that she hadn't noticed her at all. As someone who was always alone, Tatsuko should have stood out, but she seemed to be the one exception to the rule. Was Kaori completely blind here? That couldn't be.

Toko shrugged at Kaori, who was on her bed agonizing. Every single one of Toko's gestures was so irritating. That had to be why she had no friends.

"It doesn't matter what kind of weirdo she is. Just become her friend!"

"I don't feel like she's someone you can just *be friends with*, though."

"Well, I'm super-busy with my own stuff, so I can't help you there, sorry."

"Screw you, stupid fairy!"

Toko probably really was busy. She had heavy, dark circles under her eyes, and her expression was dull. But still, Kaori wanted a little more help from her. There were things only a fairy could do, like sneak into Tatsuko's house and plant a listening device or a hidden camera.

Left with no choice, Kaori firmed up her resolve to face this mission alone. Tatsuko had revealed zero weaknesses. She bore no sense of tragic resolve in being alone, and in fact, you didn't even get any sense of isolation from her—she was living her life without hesitation or faltering, which made it even worse.

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Wasn't there a weakness somewhere? Wasn't there any good weakness that would be enough for Kaori to pounce on? Her opponent was not a magical girl. Even if she had magical potential, she was a middle schooler. Kaori couldn't be dithering over someone like this.

That much she was aware of, and yet it was difficult to find a moment to speak with Tatsuko. Every time she went to talk to her, she'd miss her chance at the last second. Tatsuko was calm and self-possessed, and she revealed no openings to take advantage of—almost like whenever Kaori would try to snatch her up, Tatsuko would smoothly avoid it.

Kaori continued to observe her.

Through her continued observation, she learned one thing: Tatsuko Sakaki liked tamagoyaki. Tatsuko ate her boxed lunch dispassionately, but she always saved the tamagoyaki for last. There are two kinds of people in this world: those who left their favorite food for last and those who left their least favorite food for last. Kaori figured Tatsuko was probably the former. Twice, she carried out the pointless gesture of poking her tamagoyaki with her chopsticks—and then the muscles around her mouth moved, if indeed only slightly. That was a smile, wasn't it? She'd secretly expressed the joy of eating her favorite thing without letting anyone discover.

Tatsuko liked tamagoyaki. If Kaori could lure her with her favorite food during lunchtime, that could be her chance.

Kaori decided to make tamagoyaki for her lunch the next day. The only experience she had with cooking was doing it during home ec, but after a bit of searching online, she found a recipe that looked good and wrote it down.

First, she made the dashi soup stock. She soaked the seaweed in water overnight, and after that, she soaked dried sardines in a pot for thirty minutes, then put it on the stove, and before it came to a boil, she took out the seaweed and put in the fish flakes. Apparently, all this time and effort with the dashi was important, or else the tamagoyaki wouldn't taste right.

"Why's a stupid omelet gotta be this much work?" Kaori grumbled.

And then there was the issue of the dashi-to-egg ratio. The more dashi you added, the more flavor you got, but the more you put in, the more the eggs would fall apart and not form an omelet. The best tamagoyaki needed a perfect ratio of the two.

Or so it was supposed to, but for some reason, the result was closer to army rations with a texture like sand and a taste like clay. When Toko taste-tested it, she cursed at her, and Kaori burned the inside of her mouth.

Forget the omelet. The next strategy Kaori came up with involved an umbrella.

How about if Tatsuko came to school with an umbrella on a rainy day, but then on her way home, the umbrella was gone? It'd still be rainy outside, and without an umbrella, she'd be in a real fix. But some random person had gone and taken her umbrella with them. If a classmate were to come along in her moment of need and say, *"What's wrong, Sakaki? Huh? Someone stole your umbrella? Oh no! Here, let's share mine and walk home together,"* surely that would melt even the iciest of hearts, wouldn't it?

Fortunately, it was the rainy season. Within two days after coming up with this plan, it started to rain on and off, and the scene of the students walking to school was lined with umbrellas of various colors. As everyone commiserated with one another over how depressing the rain was, the only person chuckling to herself was Kaori.

She made sure to come to school at the same time as Tatsuko, then dawdled around the entranceway, taking her time retying her shoes and shaking the rain off her umbrella to time things right. Once she saw Tatsuko arrive, she headed to the classroom. She had made sure to note where in the umbrella stand Tatsuko had stuck her umbrella. Now it was go time.

During class, Kaori raised her hand to say she felt sick, and with the others worrying about her, she left the classroom, making perfectly sure that nobody was watching before she transformed into Rain Pow. Then she ran to the entrance and shoved Tatsuko's umbrella into a crack in the shoe cubbies, and next, she ran to the nurse's office, undid her transformation, and then lay down on the

bed there for thirty minutes.

The school day came to an end. Certain of her plan's success, Kaori secretly followed after Tatsuko, who quickly got her things together and then left the classroom. When Tatsuko's expression revealed her quandary, Kaori would reach out to her. She had simulated this in her mind countless times on the bed in the nurse's office. This was going to go off without a hitch. For some reason, Kaori's heart was pounding as hard as it did when she was on a job —maybe even more.

Tatsuko changed her shoes at her cubby and then faced the umbrella stand. She looked once, twice, and then scanned it a third time, confirming that her own umbrella wasn't there. *Yes, this is it*, Kaori thought, but right before she could reach out, Tatsuko started to walk into the falling rain.

Had Tatsuko deemed it better to go out in the rain like a drenched rat rather than rely on someone else for help? No, that wasn't it. Following after Tatsuko, Kaori's eyes widened.

Her steps were hard to call light, and her movements were, if anything, sluggish. But her goal was clear. There was no hesitation in the way she moved, and she operated with a defensive mastery. She slid smoothly between the kids with umbrellas, preventing the unusualness of her being the one person getting wet in the rain from standing out. Coming out from the school gates, she immediately headed for the eaves of a house, then traced a path from one eave to another. She had managed to secure a route. With the utmost effort, she continued to walk in places where she wouldn't get wet. This girl was good. Kaori groaned as she continued to tail her.

Tatsuko Sakaki was better than Kaori had thought.

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"The gym's open, so let's use homeroom period to play dodgeball."

So the homeroom teacher proposed, and the classroom was filled with joy and cheers. Kids were high-fiving each other and hugging, making an extravagant display of their happiness.

Kaori didn't miss any of it. Though Tatsuko was clapping along with everyone else, a slight shadow had fallen over her expression. Anyone but Kaori, who had been continuously observing Tatsuko,

would certainly have overlooked it.

It seemed Tatsuko didn't like dodgeball. Indeed, perhaps such an aggressive, high-contact sport was not suited to her. She might lack the skills to play it effectively.

Kaori pumped her fists—but not for the same reasons as her classmates. This was her opportunity.

If she were to help Tatsuko out with this—for example, by blocking a ball thrown at her or passing it to Tatsuko so she could hit an opponent—it would increase her own likability, and after the game was over, they could compliment each other, like, *"That was fun, huh?"* or *"We did it!"* And by that point, they could basically consider themselves friends.

Fortunately, Kaori and Tatsuko ended up on the same team.

Normally, Kaori held back in gym class, but she was generally pretty good at sports. No matter how clumsy Tatsuko was, Kaori should be able to back her up.

But she never quite got the chance. The balls flew past each other, and the ones who got hit grinned with embarrassment as they headed to the sidelines. But the one Kaori wanted to help out kept on dodging. Tatsuko never tried to attack or catch the ball—rather than dodging, she was focused on assuming a position, continually moving to a spot where she wouldn't get hit.

Well, she can't keep that up forever.

Since it was a big dodgeball game with the whole class participating, once you were out, that was it. No one could jump back in the game if they got hit. With the number of people inside continuing to go down, the people who only ever dodged couldn't stay there forever. They had a nice back-and-forth going. Soon enough, crisis would visit Tatsuko as well—and the one dashingly saving her from that crisis would be Kaori.

But right as she was lost in that fantasy, her feet momentarily tangled up. She reacted to a ball coming from behind a little late, so right when it was about to crash into her, she threw herself down to avoid it, and while she was getting to her feet, saying "Thanks, thanks," as the others cheered her, she found Tatsuko had disappeared from the court. She was standing apathetically on the sidelines.

Kaori was confused. Why was Tatsuko on the sidelines? Before Kaori had gone down, they'd both been on the court, so she couldn't have been hit by the ball just now. There were now few

people on the inside on Kaori's team, and the enemy team was attacking aggressively.

While evading fierce attacks from the enemy, Kaori pondered the situation. No matter how she thought about it, Tatsuko had to have quietly headed to the outside in the moment when the class's attention had been on Kaori.

To Tatsuko, the inner court would be a painful place to occupy —a place where she stood out, where she was forced to do exercise, and if she got hit, it hurt, and she'd want to get out of there as fast as possible. Fundamentally, in order to go to the sidelines, you had no choice but to pay the price and get hurt, but thanks to Kaori, Tatsuko had acquired the place to be in peace, the outside position, for free. So Kaori had indeed helped Tatsuko, but she hadn't ever anticipated that she'd do it this way.

Feeling like this game of dodgeball was now meaningless, Kaori continued avoiding the ball, remaining a participant until the bell rang. It was all in vain.

Kaori increased her observation of Tatsuko. She abandoned her naive idea to watch her as inconspicuously and naturally as possible. A little bit of unnaturalness wasn't a big deal.

Tatsuko seemed to be acting naturally, not particularly enthusiastic. But after observing her for this long, Kaori came to think that this wasn't true. Tatsuko wasn't doing this naturally—she occupied this seemingly organic solitude deliberately, through her powers of observation.

The way she looked around, the movements of her eyes—those weren't mere quirks. She was paying the utmost attention to her surroundings to keep trouble from coming to her. Kaori used to do something similar, but she really didn't know if she'd actually managed to make herself that invisible.

Don't underestimate her. And don't fear her. But she was getting scared. She was overwhelmed by this mysterious opponent who seemed about ready to swallow her up.

Kaori decided to switch tactics. She would just take Tatsuko head-on and overpower her. During their ten-minute break, Tatsuko pulled out a book with a book cover on it. Her seat was at the back of the classroom by the window. Peeking inside would be highly difficult. But if Kaori went with the brute force approach, she could succeed.

While chatting pleasantly with her friends, she lightly pushed the back of a nearby chair and then withdrew. Following the laws of physics, the chair fell over with a loud clatter. The eyes of the students in the classroom gathered on the chair. Now was her moment.

Kaori made a show of looking shocked and swiftly backed up three steps, putting her right behind Tatsuko. Moving only her eyes to check what was in the book, she immediately returned to her original position.

“Sorry, sorry,” Kaori said as she righted the chair, while on the inside, she was chuckling to herself. Kaori knew that manga. It was a fairly popular shonen manga based off a video game… She seemed to recall her sister had it.

When she went back home and checked, it was indeed on her sister’s bookshelf. Figuring she should know what was in it, at least, she pulled the manga off the bookshelf and started reading. There were only three volumes on the shelf, so she finished them quickly and reread them again. She was curious about what happened next, but her sister didn’t have the rest of the series.

Searching online, she confirmed that there were only three volumes out. The fourth was scheduled for release next month. While she was at it, Kaori also went around looking at reader responses. Among the reviews that said “this part was funny,” or “I like this character,” there was one review that caught her attention. The reviewer hypothesized that perhaps the mastermind behind it all was the childhood friend of the main character.

This character appeared at the beginning of the first volume. There was nothing strange about their behavior. But the poster wrote passionately about absence or presence of manga symbols. They pointed out that in the scene where the enemy caught them in a surprise attack, all the other characters had manga sweat drops except for the childhood friend.

When Kaori read over the scene again, indeed, that one character lacked sweat drops. Was this foreshadowing?

It piqued her curiosity. She wanted to talk to someone about it. But none of Kaori’s friends were reading this manga. If she was going to talk about it—yes, Tatsuko. Perhaps this situation now required even more urgency.

After that, she continued to observe every little detail of Tatsuko’s behavior, and if nothing happened, Kaori would cause something to happen herself. She stocked up on information on Tatsuko in her mental database.

This…might just work!

Even at home, she engaged in perfect simulations with her Tatsuko database and Tatsuko library and Tatsuko photo album, and with newfound determination that she’d for sure do it the next day, she went to bed.

This continued for some time.

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Toko hadn't been lying to Rain Pow. She'd probably never worked this hard from the time she'd become a mascot character until now. Having looked around for the other magical-girl candidates besides Tatsuko Sakaki, she'd felt this plan might go off without a hitch.

Now, if Rain Pow would just become friends with Tatsuko Sakaki, then they'd be good.

"Phew."

She lay down on the pillow. She was tired. Unlike magical girls, mascots needed sleep. *I can finally get some rest…*, she thought, and was starting to nod off when she was awoken by the sound of the door to the room banging open. Then there was a pattering of footsteps, and when she opened her eyes, she was face-to-face with a tearful Kaori.

"Hey, Toko! Listen! She's so mean! I've tried talking to her a million times, but she pretends she can't hear me! Honestly, just who does she think she is, toying with my precious emotions like this?!"

Kaori continued to wail on endlessly. *Guess I'm not gonna get any sleep now*, Toko thought in resignation, then shrugged. "Oh, well… It looks like things are about to be settled for now, on my end. Leave the rest to me. With good ol' Toko's conversational skills, a high school girl or two—"

"No!"

"No? Why?"

"I wanna handle this myself, right to the end! You should get that much!"

Swallowing her reply of, *I don't get it at all*, Toko breathed a sigh. Magical girls were always so self-centered.

"Anyway, teach me how to make tamagoyaki," Kaori said.

"Tamagoyaki? …But then you wouldn't be handling this by yourself, would you?"

"There's a field trip coming up, so I'm gonna make crazy good omelets for lunch and put her under my spell."

"This is already weird at the concept stage."

"Whatever! Just teach me! This field trip is my opportunity, okay! I swear—this time, I'm gonna make her my friend for sure!"

Beyond the Triangle

This story is set during the events of *Magical Girl Raising Project JOKERS.*

Beyond the Triangle

"There's something I wanted to ask you about—got a minute?"

Princess Quake looked away from the weekly shonen manga magazine she'd been reading and turned in the direction of the voice. Princess Tempest was regarding her with a serious expression.

They were members of the Pure Elements, the magical-girl warriors who fought to protect the world from Disrupters, evil invaders from another dimension. But the Pure Elements weren't on standby in the lab twenty-four hours a day. Sometimes, only two of them were stationed there—sometimes, only one—and it wasn't uncommon for nobody to be there at all. Currently, there was just Princess Quake, their leader, and Princess Tempest, their youngest member, on standby in the briefing room. Being in elementary school, Tempest had a school day that ended earlier than those of Princess Deluge and Prism Cherry, who were middle schoolers, and Princess Inferno, who was in high school. And Quake was in college, so her schedule was even more flexible.

"Advice?" said Quake. "You mean from me?"

"Yeah."

Princess Quake—Chiko Satou—was a university student. Being the eldest of the group had shoehorned her into the position of leader, and Tempest, being a little kid, surely saw Quake as an appropriate person to ask advice from. Though Quake felt guilty about Tempest's evaluation of her being so undeservedly high, she nodded. She couldn't say, *"You're asking advice from the wrong person. Level-headed Deluge or bubbly Inferno would be much better equipped for this. I'm probably the biggest social misfit of all the Elements. I'm the sort of quasi-creeper who finds herself looking over at children when I walk down the street."* It was Quake's nature that when a child looked to her for help, she would want to respond, and when her petty pride got into it, too, she was forced to pretend

to be an adult worth relying on.

Putting on a smile like she was quite calm about this, she set her elbows on the table and rested her chin on the back of her hand. Praying that this would make her look like a poised, mature adult, she prompted Tempest, “Do you have some kind of problem? Something on your mind?”

“I need romantic advice.”

It didn’t feel appropriate here to tease Tempest for being precocious. The girl appeared more serious than she’d ever shown even in training. It would have been so much easier if Quake could just tell her, *“You’re too young to be worrying about relationships! Wait another ten years or something!”* But at the mercy of Tempest’s earnest gaze, Quake couldn’t possibly say something like that.

Quake put her manga magazine down on the table. She had this hallucinatory sense that Tempest, on the opposite side of the table, was farther away than usual. Was it a psychological sense of distance? There was certainly a deep divide between one heart and another. The stark white briefing room felt bleaker than usual.

“Romantic advice…”

“Yeah, that. It’s about a love triangle.”

A love triangle. Suddenly, she was hit with a math problem.

It had been just under twenty years since Chiko Satou was born —long enough that she was about the age of majority. In all that time, she’d had so little interest in romantic affairs that you could basically round it down to zero. And not once had she ever been in any sort of romantic situation, either. Among her peers, there was so-and-so getting together or breaking up or whatever, but that all took place on an entirely different planet than Chiko’s. Some people out there put romantic relationships before anything else. If you were to tell them, *“I don’t have a crush on anyone”* or *“I’m not interested in a relationship,”* they’d scoff and accuse you of lying. That sort of thing would make Chiko uncomfortable, but she otherwise wasn’t bothered. Chiko’s few friends and interactions with the opposite sex were only ever on the level of business calls.

She had never particularly felt that she wanted to date someone. She would look out of the corners of her eyes at the little kids enjoying themselves on children’s playgrounds to soothe her heart, but it wasn’t like she wanted to be with those boys and girls. If those children were in trouble, she would offer as much of a helping hand as she could, and her recompense would be to enjoy

herself watching over their sweetness from a distance. It was a symbiotic relationship—different from dating between men and women who vowed to treat each other like their possessions.

And this was the kind of person Tempest claimed to want advice on what might be called a real-world application of romance: a love triangle. If she had her way, Quake would prefer to tell Tempest that an adult woman with a wealth of experience in romantic relationships would not be absorbed in reading shonen manga in the briefing room. But could she say such a thing to her face, those eyes sparkling with respect and expectation? Quake couldn't bear to cloud those beautiful, gleaming eyes with disappointment. So she steeled herself. She was now officially a master of romance. She would completely resolve Tempest's worries. That was the way a leader should be.

"A love triangle, huh? That's a tough one. Mm-hmm. Well, first, tell me about it."

"There's a boy named Shou who moved here last summer," Tempest began, but then she whipped around the other way.

With a mechanical whir, the bulkhead was sliding up. Someone was about to come into the briefing room. Once it was about eight inches up, they could see her boots. Black and red. It was Princess Inferno.

Tempest crawled atop the table, bringing her face close to Quake's. "Sorry, I can't talk about it with Inferno here. I'll ask you another time."

Quake ruminated over Tempest's fragrant breath, her adorable face—which had been so close she could just about sense her body heat—and that last whispered comment. Quake's blissful, slack-jawed expression shifted to a frown. Tempest couldn't talk about it when Inferno was here. Quake was sure that was what she'd said.

Maybe Quake was slow on the uptake, but she could still get a vague idea at times. Tempest had said she wanted to ask advice about a love triangle—could it be that one corner of that triangle was Inferno?

Tempest returned to her seat, then went to greet Inferno as if nothing had happened. "Welcome!"

"Heya! Sup, guys?"

"You're early today, Inferno."

"'Cause I transformed on the way and ran over."

Tempest addressed her like always, and Inferno responded the

same as always, too. The way Quake saw it, she couldn't see anything particularly strange about the two of them.

"What's wrong, Quake? You look down," said Inferno.

"Oh, do I? No, I'm totally fine."

"Is there something on your mind?"

"Ummm, uhhh… Oh, yes. A manga I like got canceled."

"Ahhh, that robot manga. I only ever flipped through it from time to time, so I didn't notice."

The topic shifted to the manga that had been canceled in that week's magazine. Inferno took a seat in a free chair, and Quake said, "I bought the first volume, and they added some extra content for the print volume," as she casually examined Tempest's expression.

Tempest had gone back to her usual, cheerful magical-girl self, with no sorrow or cares, listening to Quake talk. Had that been Quake's imagination? No, it couldn't be.

"Ooh, you bought it? You've got some weird taste," said Inferno.

"Hey, watch it. I actually really liked it, okay? And besides, you didn't even notice it had been canceled…? That hurts."

"But it was boring!"

"Don't hit me while I'm down, Tempest! That manga was just, you know, aimed at a slightly higher age bracket."

"Even a high schooler would think it's boring, though," said Inferno. "Like, if you're gonna have robots, you want more stuff going on, more fights. The story dragged on and on with all that behind-the-scenes stuff. You're not gonna win votes on the reader survey like that."

"Hey, that's the kind of world-building that builds a proper foundation."

"But if you get canceled while you're building the foundation…"

"Pardon me!"

"Hello!"

"Oh, Cherry and Deluge. Showing up conspicuously together, huh?" Inferno teased.

"What were you guys talking about?" asked Deluge.

"Manga," answered Tempest. "Anyway, since we've got everyone here, let's play a game in the training room. I'll beat you this time for sure, Inferno."

“That’s not a game—that’s a mock battle,” Inferno shot back.

“Mock battle, game, whatever. C’mon, c’mon, let’s do it!”

“You join in, too, Prism Cherry,” said Inferno.

“Huh? But I should be in the briefing room.”

“It’ll be fine, no worries! Today we can totally go with the no-weapons-allowed option.” Prodding Prism Cherry’s back, Tempest headed out of the briefing room. *Oh, dear.* Deluge sighed and followed after them while Inferno tossed the manga magazine on the table.

Right when Inferno was about to get up, Quake called out to her. “Do you have a minute?”

“Hmm? What? Everyone’s going, though?”

“Is there someone who moved into your neighborhood, Inferno? Around summer of last year?”

“Oh, Shou from the Minamida family? Why do you know…? Ah—Tempest, huh?” Inferno’s curious expression turned into a mischievous smile. “I heard on the autumn neighborhood field trip last year, Tempest got hurt and Shou saved her. She’s kind of been into him ever since.”

“Oh, is that right?”

“Before, she’d toddle along after me all like *‘Aka! Aka!’* And now, she’s following Shou around. It’s a little lonely, but nothing you can do about that.” She smiled, her tone light as she slid her chair out from the table. “Come on, let’s go. Tempest’ll be mad if we’re late.”

Waiting in front of the sliding bulkhead, Quake was certain. Of course—Shou was one corner of the triangle, Tempest was another, and the last corner was Inferno.

When the bulkhead had risen about a third of the way, Quake slid under it into the hall. Hearing Inferno saying, “You’re worked up for this, huh, Quake?” behind her, she overtook Deluge and Cherry, then slid under a closing bulkhead to come up by Tempest, who was doing stretching exercises in the training room.

“Hey, about what we just talked about…”

“You mean…”

“Who Shou likes. Could it be someone I know?”

Knees bent, Tempest looked up at Quake pleadingly, her lips pouted, simultaneously oozing unconscious charm and frustration. “Shou…”

“Yeah.”

“It seems he likes Aka.”

“Ahhh.”

“He’s in middle school and I’m still in elementary school, so there’s a pretty big age gap. But when I transform into a magical girl, the difference in appearance at least isn’t as big, so I thought maybe that was okay, but I was wondering where I should run into him and how.”

The bulkhead went up, and the others came into the training room, so Tempest didn’t further elaborate. But that was enough info for Quake.

During the mock battle, Quake couldn’t stop thinking about Tempest’s love triangle, so she dropped out early and went to wait with Cherry at the edge of the training room. She sank deeper into thought, hugging her knees in front of her, and wondered: If there was something she could help with, then just what was it?

First thing in the morning that weekend, Quake went to work.

She had ruminated over a way to resolve this conundrum to the point that her brain practically went numb, but it wouldn’t come together. She realized that in the first place, her lack of any experience to base this on would result in nothing more than a lecture on academic and abstract theory. She couldn’t give advice based on common opinions, either. So then she would have to conduct a thorough case study. First, she would learn about Shou, the target. She would observe him, figure out if he had a girlfriend, learn his lifestyle, the way he thought, his hobbies, preferences, and weaknesses, and create a foundation for Tempest to operate at least at a slightly greater advantage. In both manga and in real life, a foundation was key. And in order to flawlessly carry out the covert operations to that end, she needed information. She had to begin in the span of time between late night and early morning.

She pulled a baseball cap low over her eyes and wore a reversible fleece. The advantage of it being reversible went without saying. It was good for following someone. When turned inside out, not only the color but even the length of the fuzz was different. It would come off totally different to anyone who saw it.

Four in the morning. Chiko headed for Tempest and Inferno’s neighborhood on her folding bicycle. She had looked up the position of the neighborhood assembly hall. There were no streetlamps, and the area was dark, but this was actually convenient

for her. Even in the darkness, her German-made night-vision goggles would amplify the visible spectrum, so she could manage just fine, no problem. She'd bought these thinking there might be an opportunity to watch over children at night. It was a good thing they'd proven useful.

Investigating the geography of the area, she discovered a pretty good crack under the stairs of the neighborhood assembly hall. She also found a bunch of other good spots, and in every one of them, she set up a directional microphone. She'd bought these in order to pick up on children's voices, so she could rush to them if a crisis impended. It truly was a good thing they'd proven useful.

Her preparations were complete. She hid herself in the shadow of a cement-block wall that was out of sight and at a slight distance, then pulled some manga out of her suitcase and began to read. Two hours of waiting. Then she heard a child's voice through her headphones. Quietly peeking out from the shadow of the cement wall, she slid along. She noticed children gathering at the neighborhood assembly hall.

Tempest had said that she was going to be picking up garbage with the kids' club that weekend, so she would be starting up with the Pure Elements in the afternoon. Inferno had also mentioned she'd be helping out with that, so her schedule would be the same. Quake got a stealthy look at Inferno's and Tempest's human forms. There was no mistaking it. The garbage cleanup would be done right there, that day.

Moving from shadow to shadow, staying hidden, she observed the children. Chiko Satou liked children. She *loved* them. Every day she would observe children from afar and sketch them; it was a balm for her soul. But if others were to find out that she was watching them secretly, it'd be a social disaster, so she had made sure to acquire the skills to avoid detection.

With particular attention to what went on around Inferno and Tempest, she observed.

Inferno was the one giving instructions. She was one of the adults, not the children. She was a great worker—the adults relied on her, and the children trusted her, but she could still make everyone laugh and have a good time.

Tempest was among the children, as a participant. While she chattered away with kids her own age, occasionally, she would glance off in another direction. Over there was a boy of about

middle school age.

He was different. Among the other middle school boys with shaved heads or pimples or school uniform track jackets, he looked like a different creature, smiling with his hair smoothly fluttering in the wind. That had to be Shou. It seemed a pretty face with a slim-lined frame was Tempest's type.

But it didn't look as if he was paying as much attention to Inferno as Tempest said. He was laughing together with his male peers. And it looked as if he approached Inferno as a subordinate did a leader. That was respect, and it was different from longing. It could be that Tempest had the wrong idea about Shou liking Inferno. If that was the case, then Tempest very much did have a chance.

Chiko pulled her digital camera out of her suitcase and took a bunch of photos from the shadow of her sleeve. She'd practiced this skill over and over to be able to take photos without looking through the viewfinder. She didn't use the flash, of course. There were no streetlamps, and the light was still dim in this season, but if she bumped up the camera sensitivity as high as it would go, there was enough light. She had the shutter noise off, too, so her subjects would never notice. Vigilance was crucial in order to spy on someone.

Eventually, the children received some sort of instructions, and they went off in threes and fours, some on bicycles, some on foot. There would be no need to investigate what Inferno and Tempest were doing right now. Chiko followed after the little group Shou was a part of.

Along their way, the small group split up further, and pushing a wheelbarrow, Shou proceeded deeper into the residential area. Chiko trailed him cautiously, making use of all the techniques she had cultivated until now. She couldn't let anyone blow her cover and make things difficult for her going forward, even if that meant she had to transform into a magical girl to run when the time came. Yes, going forward—not just for now. She wouldn't stop at observing—she also had to do things to promote Tempest. She couldn't fail here.

Swiftly moving from the shadow of one telephone pole to another, she monitored Shou's movements. He went from house to house without pause, piling cardboard boxes, newspapers, and stacks of flyers into the wheelbarrow. He piled the items

meticulously, loading the wheelbarrow properly without leaving gaps, and when he ran into people from the neighborhood, he greeted them breezily.

Shou moved deeper and deeper in, and then once he added the cardboard box from in front of the gates at the dead end to the pile, he had a big enough stack of recycling that he had to hold the top of the wheelbarrow mound with one hand, or he couldn't wheel it properly.

Before Shou could turn around, Chiko headed back to the main road, then made herself small in one residence's backyard as she waited for him to pass by. She couldn't allow herself to be found here. She couldn't stop trailing him. One of her goals was to follow him until she could learn where he lived. Finding his house would make it possible to know him deeper, more thoroughly.

She felt quite bad for doing this to him, but this was for Tempest's sake. In Chiko's mind, ranking children by their priority took greatest precedence, and when it came to Tempest, her friend, she ranked higher than the law, ethics, or even Chiko herself.

Hiding behind a cement-block wall, she slipped past Shou. She waited for the moment her target disappeared from her field of view, then crossed over the wall to come out in the alley. Remaining cognizant of the various blind spots available, she was about to emerge from the alley onto the road when she sensed a presence, and panicking, she hid in the shadow of a telephone pole. When she gently peeked out to check on things, she saw three children carrying recycling who had gathered and were chatting. Seeing the face of the high schooler who came over to them, Chiko shifted from the telephone pole to behind a cement-block wall. It was Inferno. She was telling them with a smile, "Don't stand around chatting here; let's get this over with quick."

It was bad for Inferno to be there. Her intuition could be abnormally sharp at times. Though Chiko had only ever shown her face in her human form once, Inferno was definitely not someone you could be careless around. From behind the cement wall, Chiko made sure that Inferno had left, leading the children, then after they were out of sight, she breathed a sigh of relief. Taking off her baseball cap, she wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. This was bad for her heart.

"Um."

When she turned around, there was Shou, the target she was

supposed to be monitoring.

"Can I help you?" she replied, feigning composure, but inside, her heart was now palpitating with an intensity incomparable with the time Inferno had come, and she was sweating considerably from her palms and back—so much so that she could feel the sweat dripping down her spine. Not only had she been discovered in a questionable position, she was startlingly unused to talking to handsome young men. She didn't even have the mental capacity right then to consider if a middle school boy even counted as a young man or not. Shou was confident in his approach of this suspicious woman who was rattled while pretending to be calm. Chiko remembered a friend saying that what made a face handsome was not only looks but manner.

"Would you mind letting me through?" Shou asked.

"Pardon?"

"Forgive me, the road's quite narrow."

"Oh, sorry."

The road was too tight for a woman with a suitcase and a middle schooler pushing a wheelbarrow at maximum capacity to pass each other. Chiko lifted up her suitcase, doing her best to squish aside, moving to the edge of the road to yield the space. Shou bowed his head with a "Thanks," and then he brought the wheelbarrow close enough to the wall that it nearly scraped it, but even so, Chiko's suitcase touched Shou's shoulder.

Her suitcase was filled with secret tools. She didn't even want to think about what would happen if she were to drop the suitcase now and spill out all the contents. They were all goods she'd bought for observing children, and the odds were high that other people would get the wrong idea if they saw. In other words, she had to keep it all hidden.

Chiko had confidence in her grip strength for a woman. She grasped her suitcase firmly, squeezing it to ensure it would absolutely not fall. But that meant she was paying less attention to other things. She lost the sense of weight that had been in the pocket of her fleece, and something fell onto the concrete with a thump.

She wouldn't leave anything in her pocket that would get her in trouble if found. What had fallen on the concrete was the manga she'd been reading to kill time while waiting.

Before Chiko could bend over, Shou, pushing the wheelbarrow,

came back and picked up the comic. Chiko extended her hand and said, “Thanks for doing that,” but she didn’t get the comic back. Shou’s eyes were on the cover.

“Um…” He opened his bright eyes wide, tousled his hair, and looked at Chiko.

Overwhelmed, Chiko backed up, but Shou grabbed her wrist and wouldn’t let go. “This manga!”

“Pardon?”

“Do you like it?”

“Oh, I suppose.”

Shou clenched his fists and pumped them up and down as if overcome with happiness. “Yes!” he cheered to himself. Chiko could see the joy of someone lost in the desert having found an oasis.

“I like it, too!” he said.

“Oh, really?”

“I don’t know anyone else who does… And honestly, the reception online hasn’t been too great, either. If you say you like it, then people just harass you… It’s almost like you can’t talk about it anymore.”

“You’re better off not worrying about that sort of thing.”

“I never thought I’d run into anyone who’s actually bought the book! Seriously, I’m so happy! I sent in my vote on the survey postcards every week, but its ranking kept going down and down, so I started buying two magazines to send in the postcards, but it still kept going down, and then it got canceled…”

At this point, he went, “Ah!” and released Chiko’s wrist. “S-sorry for suddenly taking your hand like that.”

“No, really, don’t worry about it.”

“I’m just so glad I got to actually meet someone who’s bought that manga… Sorry.”

“I get that. I mean, I wish it were more appreciated, too. Hopefully the additions in the final volume will improve the reviews a bit.”

“Huh? There’s gonna be new stuff?”

“The artist said so at the magazine’s event, apparently. They haven’t revealed what the additional content will be, but I think it’ll probably be an epilogue. There were also a lot of parts of the final battle that got cut, so maybe they’ll add that, too. Rateman was like that, too.”

“Rateman?”

“You don’t know the old anime, *Paranormal Knight Rateman*? This manga was pretty blatantly paying homage to Rateman. I heard it had a pretty big influence on the writing.”

“Oh, really…? I had no idea.”

“But it’s not a rip-off or anything. For example, there’s the relationship between the main character and the heroine, right? The way if one dies, the other will be forced to die, too, is based off Rateman—but then it’s got the guts to take it a step further.”

“Yeah, exactly!”

Seeing Shou happy somehow delighted Chiko, too. She told Shou the things she’d learned about it online and in other media and even things that were basically just rumors, but he reacted to everything in a practically exaggerated sort of way.

He took Chiko’s hand in both his own, passionately saying things like, “That’s what tightened up the story,” “I felt like they were trying to bring it to a conclusion, even though it was getting canceled,” and “It became a manga that you can’t fit into the box of

other robot stories."

But then after talking for a while, he seemed to realize he'd grabbed Chiko's hand again and let go of it with an apology. He was beet red. "I really am sorry. I got worked up… I've never had anyone I could talk about this manga with before. And then you told me all sorts of things I didn't know… You know so much."

"Oh no, not at all." Chiko could understand why he'd get excited. Though it had been serialized in a major magazine, there weren't many people who would want to talk about a canceled manga. You could go online to seek such people out, but the manga had had an unfavorable reception on the Internet, too.

Chiko and Shou talked about the manga's story, the characters, their own opinions, and the artist's previous work as well. Standing side by side, leaning against the cement wall, they passionately discussed their theories of manga. The enthusiasm of the person you're talking to is infectious. Shou must have been pretty excited, too. Occasionally, he grabbed Chiko's hand, and every time, he'd blush and apologize.

The topic of conversation was extending even to the merits and drawbacks of the cancellation system that placed so much weight on surveys, but at this point, they heard a loud voice that carried well coming from the main road.

"Heeey, this group is late! C'mon, we've got to get this done already."

It was Inferno's voice. Chiko and Shou both jumped away from the cement wall.

This was bad. The number one person she couldn't have finding her had come. Regretting that she'd gotten too into talking about manga, Chiko rushed to leave but lost her balance and pitched forward.

"Oh, s-sorry."

It was because Shou was holding onto Chiko's suitcase. She swallowed the remark, *"Just what are you trying to do?"* in the back of her throat and tried to leave, figuring she had to get out of there, but this time, Shou grabbed the cuff of her fleece.

He started opening his mouth and tried to say something, looked down, put his hand on his own shoulder, then looked up and opened his mouth again as if he'd made up his mind. "Um, uh… Would you…exchange e-mails with me? There's no one I can talk about these things to… Um, if it's not a bother."

“Oh, sure. Right. Then I’ll e-mail you later.”

“Th-thank you so much!”

She wanted to get away immediately. Inferno could come over at any time. Pulling out her smartphone, she quickly exchanged e-mails with him, and then they parted ways. This was the first time Chiko Satou had ever exchanged e-mails with a young man in her life, but as for whether a middle school boy counted as a young man or not, the answer never came, until the end.

At a later date, in the briefing room.

Having finished their training, all members of the Pure Elements were sitting on chairs around the table. Inferno and Deluge were together, reading the same shonen manga magazine, while Tempest was doing her math homework, and Prism Cherry was at her side as her adviser.

Even as Quake was grinding for levels in a cell phone game, she was thinking about something else completely. She hadn’t e-mailed Shou yet. Even if he was a middle schooler, Chiko had never gotten that deep into a conversation with a young man. Was that what they called the power of a handsome face? Maybe that was what had charmed Tempest, too.

Having acquired Shou’s e-mail was a plus. And there was one other plus—observed objectively, it didn’t seem as if he was attracted to Inferno. Now they had two pluses. She would inform Tempest, while being vague about the methods she’d used to acquire that information as much as possible. Tempest would surely be glad.

First, Quake would make it so that she was alone with Tempest and tell her the situation. Then she would also send an e-mail to Shou. Maybe it would be best to leave it to the two of them what to do from here on out. Tempest was trying to build a romantic relationship in her magical-girl form, but Quake wanted to have a proper discussion with her about whether that was truly a good idea. She was still a second grader. She would make mistakes. And Quake wanted to be someone who would kindly admonish her when she made mistakes.

Tempest had gone out because she’d run out of lead for her mechanical pencil. Quake thought about following after her and telling her about Shou, but there was no need to hurry that much. Better to let this sit as long as possible. As she was waiting for the

right moment, Quake could daydream about Tempest's smiling face. That would be such a happy thing. Chiko acting as the matchmaker, treating them to coffee or cake at a café while chatting might not be so bad, either. When Chiko tried imagining it, she just couldn't help making it too picturesque, and she immediately erased the thought. Feeling embarrassed for some reason, she shook her head.

Two would be better than three. Two young people together was nice. Quake would not come to the fore, committing to the Cupid role. She figured romantic matters were a hassle—no good at all. But if she stuck to playing Cupid, then this could actually be rather fun. Starting to see why society was so in love with romance, Quake felt the corners of her mouth turn up in a little smile.

Primula Farinosa

This story is set after *Magical Girl Raising Project JOKERS.*

Primula Farinosa

☆ **Mariko Fukuroi**

Mariko Fukuroi knew Marika Fukuroi, her magical-girl form, better than anyone.

Marika Fukuroi lived how she wanted and did what she wanted. Mariko also lived life as she pleased, but Marika was on a whole other level.

Everyone who knew Marika would acknowledge with irritation, “Yeah, she definitely does what she wants,” and Marika acknowledged it herself, too. Picking fights with the people around her, punching anyone she didn’t like, kicking even those she did like—her lifestyle was an immense nuisance for everyone aside from herself, but she was cheerful about it all, giving no shits for anything.

When she’d first become a magical girl, she’d been so utterly excited. Enjoying her new powers, she’d gone around having fun. She figured even an elementary school kid on the day of their field trip wouldn’t be as giddy as that. She’d been so ecstatic, she’d snapped a telephone pole and gotten scolded by her examiner. She’d considered punching her down but had gotten subdued herself instead.

Her examiner had been a veteran from the Archfiend Cram School and not one so soft as to be taken by surprise by a newbie who got carried away.

Marika had felt no sense of loss or discouragement then—in fact, she’d been excited. Discovering there were others as strong as her had made her want to try it out. It made her want to discover exactly how far she could go. And so Marika Fukuroi was born.

It wasn’t that Marika and Mariko had two different personalities. They shared one consciousness. But Marika was a tad more free-spirited and out of control than Mariko.

The months and days had flown by with frightening speed. All the while, Marika continued to act wildly as her whims dictated while Mariko supported her, deepening her research. Fortunately, she had inherited enough assets and real estate from her father that she could live off only the rental income. She had enough freedom to fully pursue her hobbies without getting a full-time job. Full-time magical girl was a job that should be done by someone who could eat without need for employment.

She set the three-layer lock on the door of her research lab. She would leave things to the security company while she was out. Keys jangling, she searched among them for the one to the family vehicle and returned to the car parked on the shoulder of the road. Her lab was closed for the moment, and she was taking a break from all research activity. She'd just left the electricity system on for her plant calluses.

"Marika's Magic Research" was of number one importance to Mariko, the thing she had to treasure and value the most. Germinating various seeds on her head, she broadened or deepened the magic of the blossoms by altering the conditions she grew them in, such as the amount of sunlight and water given, adjusting the composition of the atmosphere, and adding magical nutrients and hormones. Exchanging techniques with a few mages who were no longer in office and providing them with her research results had won her better equipment as well as the mages' specialized knowledge. Each time she was able to do something new, she invested more money and increased the scale of the plant that adjoined the lab.

These were not seeds for food. She'd made it so people thought, *The daughter of a rich family is doing some research for pleasure; I don't know what.* When others asked, "What's your daughter up to?" more than once or twice, her parents had responded with anger, not knowing how to reply. But even so, to Mariko and to Marika, the research was of primary importance.

So what was it that she was leaving aside this primary importance for?

In her car, she took out her cell phone and checked her messages. Various people associated with the school she'd be working at the next day had contacted her. There were greetings like, I'm looking forward to seeing you tomorrow, a message that

said, I want to discuss with you, so please call, someone checking with her like, Is this restaurant all right for the welcome party? and all sorts of various people contacting her through e-mail. If you included the spam, it filled up her phone's entire display. She had slacked off only a little in keeping on top of them, and this was what she got.

As she considered the messages and which she should prioritize responding to, she was struck with an idea and pulled out her magical phone. She checked the in-box, but there was nothing there. Maybe some people would contact Mariko Fukuroi, but not a single magical girl would want to make contact with Marika Fukuroi. At the end, she looked at her history. The one there was Styler Mimi.

Styler Mimi was gone now. Though the beautician had cursed at Marika every time she visited, she'd let her into her house. Now that she was gone, there was nobody Marika could invite casually. Her relationship with Amy and Monako amounted to hanging out when they felt like it, and she often couldn't get ahold of them. She didn't know where they were or what they were doing right now, or in fact, even if they were alive.

Mariko turned off her magical phone. She'd known she'd get no messages. She hadn't had to bother checking. About to delete Mimi's address, after some consideration, she stopped and tossed her magical phone into her bag.

"Though I'll only be with you until Mrs. Tadokoro's return, I'm glad to meet you all."

She smiled and bowed. There was an applause and then a slight murmuring. As expected of a university-oriented high school, there was very little whispering during morning announcements. But they did stare rudely. Maybe people in small towns were highly wary of strangers. And the examining looks of the teachers were no different from those of the students. No—they were perhaps even stronger, with the added feeling that they didn't want an intruder coming in to mess up their little garden. Even as they smiled, they were evaluating to see just what sort of person this substitute teacher was.

Mariko adjusted her glasses and, with the sleeves of her long white jacket fluttering, returned to the chair that had been set for her in the corner of the gym.

She'd earned her teacher's certification back in college. She'd figured she might as well, since there was no harm in having it, but contrary to her expectations, it had brought her harm. She'd been forced into doing something she didn't want to do.

Society saw Mariko as someone who only ever immersed herself in research and didn't get a job or get married. Since it was difficult to explain what her research was about without the magical-girl stuff, her parents perceived it as "Not something to be proud of," "Useless," and "Something we don't really get." So it was treated as the dark side of the Fukuroi household, and when the subject came up at the dinner table, it would make things uncomfortable.

They had a daughter who used her living alone as an excuse to indulge in her hobby of suspicious experiments. Of course, if you were her parents, you'd want her to return to society. Mariko's parents frequently brought her "good ideas." They would be photos and a written personal history of an arranged marriage partner or a job opportunity. Ninety-five percent of the time, Mariko refused flatly, but she felt a little bad about making her mother cry.

For that reason, it had become her habit to consent to one item that seemed like comparatively less hassle, to make it look like she really intended to involve herself with the world. She'd feel bad for her mother if she was constantly adding to her stress burden, making her worry about her daughter. She had to let off some of the pressure.

This time, it was a teaching job. It was a temporary position at a private high school. Basically, she was subbing for a teacher on maternity leave. Using the most powerful connections they had, her parents had thrust Mariko into that open bracket.

Their doing this made Mariko feel very sorry for all the other hopefuls who had been crowded out because of her. People who were serious about purely pursuing teaching as a career might tell her something like, *"I feel bad for the students who'd get taught by a half-assed teacher like you,"* but she had her own reasons for this, too.

"How old are you?"

"Are you married?"

"What type of shampoo do you use?"

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Why were you wearing a lab coat at the commencement ceremony?"

Casually ignoring the questions of the chattering girls who surged toward her after the morning announcements, Mariko headed back to the staff room and walked around bowing to the important people in order. She'd already said hi to everyone and distributed her business cards, but more things than you would expect could be managed smoothly just by bowing your head. This daughter was not as lacking in social graces as her parents thought.

There were no classes that day. But there were quite a few things she had to do. Greetings was one of them, but there were also meetings. She wanted to see the students' faces. And there were also things she wanted to talk about with teachers of various subjects. She wanted to see the science room, and she wanted to check and see what kind of equipment they had in the science prep room. She also wanted to know what sort of activities the Science Club was engaged in. And she had to make sure to leave some time for the welcome party. There was also the after-party that they'd probably throw, too. Socializing with coworkers was important. She'd prepared for that much, at least.

She managed what needed to be done as fast as possible, and by the time she was able to take a break, the sun had already set. This kind of work wasn't a total bore; she was gradually starting to enjoy herself. Besides, the school atmosphere wasn't bad, either. It was nice to think back on the time she had been a student, too.

Taking the key from the cabinet in the staff room, she went up to the roof to look down over the sports field. The baseball team was doing warm-ups, and the Soccer Club was running laps. The school even had a lacrosse team.

The door was usually locked, so there was nobody on the roof. The door creaked with rust. The gutters were choked with leaves, and left without a channel, the fresh-fallen rain was overflowing. This was probably an expression of rationalism rather than negligence on the part of the school: There was no need to maintain a place that was always locked.

Mariko checked that the wall wasn't dirty before leaning against it. If she approached the fence, the students running on the field might be able to see her. She'd only just been hired, so she probably shouldn't let people see her committing even such minor infractions. Even from the wall, she could get enough of a view. The roof was good for this.

There were a lot of hassles, but this work wasn't bad—so it

seemed.

The smell of salt wafted from the sea to the west. The only flaw this view had was the tall iron tower. To the south, she could see a cluster of multistoried buildings of middling height—probably the types of shops with neon signs that would light up come nightfall.

Over by the school gates, she could see students heading home: some silently, with their gazes pointed at their feet; some talking with their friends; some goofing off to get a laugh; others engaged in a debate, a hair away from an argument. What had she been like as a kid? She'd found it too much of a bother to talk, and she'd only had two or three friends. Maybe people thought she was stubborn. If she were to be in school now, she'd be able to be a little more sociable. Just thinking about this sort of thing was fun, in its own way.

But she shouldn't be having fun. Mariko checked her watch. *Maybe I've taken too much of a break*, she thought. Thirty minutes had passed. A bit long for a break.

She strode swiftly for the staff room, and as she turned a corner, she heard some girls chatting up ahead. But no matter how cheery she was feeling, she wasn't so careless as to bump into someone. She calmly slipped past the students, bobbing her head with an "Oh, sorry there," when her one of the girls caught her eye.

She wasn't the type who stood out. She was plain, actually. Her clothing and hairstyle both firmly adhered to school regulation. Mariko had seen that face somewhere—but where? She suddenly remembered right as the girl passed by and grabbed her upper arm, stopping her in place. The girl seemed a bit uneasy, looking back at Mariko with doubt and a bit of shock.

This was the girl who had so calmly defied the teachings that Marika's one-time teacher Archfiend Pam had constantly chanted like some sort of mantra: "Don't detransform on the battlefield." In that underground laboratory crowded with magical girls, the only one who'd left the most vivid impression on Mariko had been this girl—a human.

The girl was looking at Mariko, waiting in the expectation that Mariko was going to say something.

Mariko had stopped her without thinking, but no words would come out. The girl remained confused, and now, Mariko finally noticed the other girls with her who looked like her friends. One of them poked the girl in the side with an elbow.

“Hey, Koyuki. You know this teacher?”

Another girl immediately cut in: “Sorry, miss. She missed half the commencement ceremony, so she didn’t quite catch your introduction.”

Snow White. Also known as the Magical-Girl Hunter. Marika had witnessed her reverting to her human state back when Marika had gone underground in search of artificial magical girls. Many had lost their lives, among them Styler Mimi, whom Marika Fukuroi had forced to come with her. Mariko had thought back on that time in her hospital bed over and over, and even afterward, every little thing brought it back to her mind. Hadn’t there been any other, better way? Hadn’t there been a way to avoid deaths?

Her thoughts were racing, but figuring there was something else she should be thinking about now, she snapped back to reality.

What should she bring up first? How should she say it?

Cheers rose over the sports field. Snow White—Koyuki—glanced over to see where the commotion was coming from. Her expression was soft—maybe it was because this situation was nothing like the time they’d been underground. She really did look like just a regular girl.

“Oh, sorry.” In the end, Mariko couldn’t think of anything, so she apologized and let go of Koyuki’s arm. Picking out words in her mind, she wondered how to explain, but before she could say anything, Koyuki bowed her head.

“…Pardon me.”

Koyuki started walking again, passing by Mariko, and her two friends followed right after her, saying, “Hey, wait!” and “What was that about? Someone you know?”

Mariko turned around and watched them leave, then brushed a hand through her hair with a deep sigh, now having gathered herself enough to examine her surroundings once more. The students walking in the hallway were looking at them—some with blatant curiosity, some with suspicion, some as if this was entertainment. It seemed she’d brought attention to herself—and not in a good way.

The cheers outside the window gradually quieted down. Mariko pulled together the collar of her white coat.

☆ **Koyuki Himekawa**

Leaving school with her two friends—Sari, whom she'd gotten to know after starting high school, and Yoshiko, whom she'd been friends with since middle school—Koyuki went to the parfait place at the intersection in front of the train station. This place was a step up from the fast-food joints of their middle school days.

"Was that lady the new teacher?" Koyuki asked.

"Yeah, yeah, Mrs. Tadokoro is on maternity leave, right? That's the substitute science teacher. You didn't know 'cause you were skipping, huh, Koyuki?"

"I wasn't skipping! I was just a little late."

"The boys were freaking out! They were all whispering stuff to one another."

"*You* were freaking out more than the boys, Sari," said Yoshiko.

"It's good manners to freak out when you see someone so pretty. That type's nice, huh? All serious and proper with those glasses during the day, but I bet she's crazy different at night… Heh-heh."

"Why do we have to listen to your gross comments, again?"

"So what was that about, Koyuki? She looked like she knew you."

"Yeah, yeah! How do you know her?"

"I don't."

"Whaaaaat?!" Koyuki's friends shouted, filled with surprise and reproach.

"Come on. So then what was that about? Why'd she suddenly grab your arm?"

"Maybe you just forgot who she was?"

"I don't think that's it… But I'm not really quite sure."

"You do that all the time, huh, Sari? Forgetting people's faces," said Yoshiko.

"All the time? Hey, I don't appreciate being treated like I'm some ditz. It's not my fault—if I forget who someone is, that means they weren't memorable enough."

"Sup, guys! Whatcha talking about?"

"Ohhh, Sumi!" said Sari. "Listen, Yoshi's so mean!"

Cleanly avoiding Sari's attempt to cling to her, Sumire took the open seat. She went to a different high school from Yoshiko, Sari, and Koyuki. But even if she had a different uniform and high school, they had met up after school like this a number of times, and she was close enough with Sari to flirt around with her.

Yoshiko had been like, “Isn’t it just that she has no friends at her school?” in a way you couldn’t tell if it was concern or an insult, but Fal’s investigation had discovered that Sumire did have friends and seemed to be having a good time at school.

“Why are you complaining? Yoshi’s always been mean,” said Sumire.

“Ah, I knew it!”

“Yeah, anytime I’m onto something fun, this lovely lady immediately shoots me down.”

“Why are you changing the subject to me? We’re talking about Koyuki.”

“I’m okay talking about you instead, Yoshi.”

“Don’t you try to weasel out of this one, too, Koyuki!”

“Did Koyuki get up to something?”

“It looked like the new teacher knows her, but Koyuki says they’ve never met.”

“Whoa, that’s harsh, Koyuki.”

“And then Yoshi was trying to make it sound like I’m the forgetful one! But like, if it’s someone memorable, then I won’t forget them, right? So then I’m a step up from Koyuki. That teacher’s memorable, right? I mean, she’s pretty. That’s why I haven’t forgotten her name. It’s Mariko Fukuroi.”

There was the sound of liquid spurting, and then shrieks followed, and then came murmuring from the other customers. Koyuki coughed. She’d practically choked on her milkshake—actually, she *had* started choking.

“Whoa, Koyuki?! What’s going on?! You spewed milkshake all over everybody!”

“U-um, sorry, I’m okay. I just choked a little.”

“Y’know…,” said Sumire, “…I’d really appreciate it if you showed a little more concern for me, the one who got milkshake sprayed in her face.”

“I was thinking I’d be better off not saying anything ’cause you look real gross right now,” said Yoshiko.

“Hang on, I’m gonna take a pic. You look amazing, Sumi. Heyyy, over here! Gimme a weak smile! Ooh, maybe do two peace signs, too.”

“Whoa, she does look super gross… Sari, send that photo to me later, too.”

“S-sorry, Sumi.” Koyuki apologized to the staff, her friends, and

the customers around as well.

Mariko Fukuroi—Koyuki knew a very similar name. The magical girl people said was battle-crazy through and through, who had even been expelled from the martial gathering that was the Archfiend Cram School. Not long ago, Snow White had fought together with her in the underground laboratory. Marika was as bold as the rumors said, but Koyuki had never imagined she'd be operating practically under her real name. And one more thing—Koyuki hadn't expected she'd possess enough social graces to be able to teach, either.

☆ **Mariko Fukuroi**

She wanted to offer a proper thank-you to Snow White. If Snow White hadn't been there, Marika Fukuroi would have died. Mariko wanted to hear about what had happened afterward, too, and about what had happened while Marika had been unconscious. And there were lots of things Mariko wanted to tell her about, too. But even if she wanted to talk to Snow White, Mariko didn't know her contact information. When she had tried making inquiries at the desk at the Inspection Department, with which Snow White was affiliated, they'd yelled at her, like, "Of course we can't release information about our investigators to the outside!" and in the end it had turned into a fight and blows had been exchanged, tables had flown, chairs had been stomped, the floor had given way, and the ceiling had collapsed. Maybe they just hadn't wanted to turn it into a public matter, as Marika had avoided any punishment, but she still didn't have Snow White's contact information, and she'd been starting to give up, figuring there was nothing she could do.

They said magical girls had a mysterious luck when it came to encounters. In her long time as a magical girl, Marika had had countless opportunities to feel that personally. And this was another one of those moments.

Koyuki seemed to be smiling and talking without worry, like the sort of completely ordinary high school girl you'd find anywhere. The violent-sounding nickname of the Magical-Girl Hunter wasn't at all fitting for her. But Mariko had just the smallest sense that something was off.

This wasn't the lifestyle of a magical girl who had abandoned

society. It looked as if her real life was quite fulfilling. She was doing a proper job being a magical girl and a human. She was too good, in fact. An active magical girl of high school age was expected to have more weaknesses. She was too flawless. She didn't even let her guard down around her friends, who normally, she should be able to relax with. That was the kind of life she led.

Mariko thought about Snow White and Koyuki Himekawa, but she had to get other things done, too, or she couldn't get on with her life. *Guess I'll at least pretend to be a good teacher*, she thought after her bath, and she was about to pull a small stack of tests from her bag when her hand slipped and the papers fell onto the table, which was stacked with unwashed dishes. She hurriedly scooped up the stack, but some of the test papers had wound up stained by pizza cheese and meat sauce.

She sighed. What was she doing?

Maybe I can at least lighten the stains somehow, she thought as she spread out the test papers. Then she heard an unfamiliar ring. Or rather, she thought it was unfamiliar. When was the last time Marika's magical phone had rung? Sliding the plates to the side, she somehow created space on the table to leave the test papers and pulled out her magical phone to check it.

It was from an unfamiliar address. Her magical phone wouldn't accept any kind of spam mail, in the first place. The subject line was This is Snow White, and Mariko opened it without hesitation.

Displayed was a message of the same level of politeness as a student would use on an e-mail to a teacher: I'd like to meet. Could you let me know what evening is most convenient for you? Marika picked up the glasses she'd left in a gap between the dishes and read over the message one more time. It did indeed say she wanted to meet.

It seemed she'd realized that Mariko was Marika. Perhaps her two friends had helped out there. They were good friends. She was thankful for that.

If she wanted to meet, then any time was fine. Mariko could get ready in five minutes. Sweets would probably be a reasonable gift. A number of cake shops came to mind, and selecting a candidate, Mariko picked up her clutch bag, then pulled off the cloth covering her full-length mirror too hard and knocked over a bottle of face cream, then scrambled to put it back in place. She got the feeling that she was getting overexcited, or rather, panicking. Taking a

deep breath in an attempt to calm down a bit, she flung her arms wide and knocked down her face cream again, and this time, it fell into the trash can beside the mirror.

☆ **Fal**

"Did you hear Marika Fukuroi attacked headquarters, pon?"

"Yeah. She broke the front desk, right?"

"Apparently, she barged in and yelled, 'Where's Snow White?!' and made a huge mess of things, pon. Not just the furniture—even the floor and ceiling got destroyed, pon."

But the Inspection Department still hadn't revealed Snow White's whereabouts. And Marika hadn't given up there. However she'd managed to sniff her out, she'd found Snow White's location and gotten a job in the life of Koyuki Himekawa, Snow White's human form, what you would call her real identity.

"Dirty money uses these kinds of methods, pon. I hear they call your workplace to put pressure on you, pon. But this is way nastier than that. It's more like a villain targeting a hero's relatives, threatening their regular lives, pon. Truly an evil deed, pon."

"You're being too dramatic."

"No! There's nothing dramatic about this, pon! In order to get a teaching job, you have to jump more hurdles than just making a phone call, pon. And those hurdles are high enough to make you crane your neck. It's not like having a teaching license is enough, pon. Either she's using some connections or people, or engaging in kidnapping and confinement or threats or force of violence against related parties… How frightening, pon. With Marika Fukuroi, any of these things seems possible, pon."

Precisely how much twisted enthusiasm and effort was she bringing to bear to approach Snow White? Occasionally, some magical girls would be obsessive like that. Fal's old master, Keek, had also had that streak to her, and Keek's teacher, Frederica, had been like that, too. Marika Fukuroi was a battle maniac who wanted nothing more than to fight, but if there was a certain opponent she wanted to engage, she'd probably get just as fixated.

"Threatening not only Snow White, but Koyuki Himekawa's life, too—she's dangerous. She's bound to hurt your family and friends, pon. We have to deal with her somehow, pon."

“I really think you’re being dramatic.”

“I’m not being dramatic, pon! You can’t let your guard down, pon! Marika Fukuroi has always been a magical girl to be feared, someone you can’t underestimate, pon. Even just thinking about her makes me start shuddering, pon.”

“Did you know her?”

“I’ve used her data before, in the simulator. If you add Marika Fukuroi in the mix, things generally turn into a mess, pon. Nobody can stop her. So you can’t let your guard down, pon. Do exactly as we discussed, pon.”

After a hurried discussion, Fal and Snow White had decided to bring Marika Fukuroi to them. If her wish was to have a match against Snow White, then Fal wanted to fulfill that wish quickly and send her on her way. And if that wasn’t what she was after, then they had to find out what her goal was in getting this teaching job. It didn’t matter how she tried to hide her true intentions—in fact, the more she tried to hide it, the more Snow White’s magic would catch it.

“I think you’re being too hard on her.”

“Her methods will make masters in the craft flee barefooted! It’s impossible to be too hard on her, pon. Snow White, you’re too soft, pon. One day, that naïveté will pull the rug right out from under you, pon.”

“But she wasn’t thinking about anything that complicated.”

“Maybe she can be a strong ally against a common enemy. But the hero of turbulent times is the villain of peaceful times, pon. Whatever she’s plotting, it’s definitely not going to work out well for you, pon.”

Fal had put measures in place so that if anyone—from Koyuki’s family, friends, acquaintances, and relatives to any familiar neighborhood faces—was attacked, they would instantly be pulled into a digital space for their protection. With their meeting being at night, with no sun, and the place on top of a building and far from the ground, they had created a situation that would be disadvantageous to Marika.

“You’re underestimating a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School, Snow White, pon.”

“I’m not.”

“You can’t get cocky just because you caught Flame Flamey, pon. You misunderstand; Flame Flamey isn’t at all representative of

the Archfiend Cram School, pon. In fact, she's not even a standard or an example, pon. You should think of her as the bare minimum of its students, pon. Fal has been taught good and hard how scary the Archfiend Cram School is, pon."

"Did something happen?"

"The presence of someone from the Archfiend Cram School takes the difficulty of a game to a whole other level, pon. It meant Fal wound up having to reassemble the whole program… I never want to have to go through that again, pon."

"This isn't about your personal grudge?"

"It's not a grudge, pon! You absolutely can't let your guard down. Keep Ruler at the ready, pon. Be ready to handle an attack from any direction, pon."

Prompting Snow White many times to be cautious, Fal waited with her on the roof of the building. Fal didn't forget to examine their surroundings. Fal didn't know if it was plumbing for water or gas pipes or what; more of it was exposed than was usual, and so Fal wanted to make sure Snow White wouldn't get tripped up. The spherical storage tank, maybe they could make a weapon. Or rather, Marika Fukuroi was liable to use it as a weapon.

"Hey, Fal."

"What is it, pon?"

"Looks like she's here."

"Where?! Where, pon?! Above?! Or is she lurking in the shadows…?"

"No, that's not what I mean."

They could hear something—a brisk tapping on concrete. The sound got slowly louder, and by the time Fal understood they were footsteps, the door to the roof was slowly creaking open. A white box emerged from behind the door followed by a woman in a white lab coat who was holding the box in her right hand. Despite the cloudy, starless sky, the shine of the electric lights lower on the building made the whiteness of the coat and box stand out. It was a human woman, the substitute teacher who had grabbed Koyuki Himekawa's arm the other day on her way home—Mariko Fukuroi. It was Marika Fukuroi's identity before transforming.

"Hey, sup?" she said as she held up the box, and with a movement like slicing with a knife-hand, she made to approach Snow White—but then stopped partway. Her expression turned dubious, and she looked at Snow White transformed, then at Ruler

held in her right hand. She seemed to be considering for a moment before she nodded and said, “Oh, I see.” After pushing up her glasses with her free left hand, she quickly closed the distance between herself and Snow White to hold the box out to her.

Without giving Fal the time to warn her, Snow White accepted the box, and Mariko turned around, striding off the way she’d come before disappearing back through the door to the roof.

“…What was that, pon?”

“She read the room.”

“What?”

Snow White set the white box down on a concrete block and readied Ruler in both hands. “I’ll have the cake later.”

“Cake? Oh, this box is cake, pon? Huh? Why cake?”

“Here she comes.”

The door to the roof opened with a fierce bang. It had been kicked open.

“Sorry to make you wait, Magical-Girl Hunter! You’re gonna show me a real good time! Ha-haaa!”

Marika Fukuroi, with an evening primrose shining white on her head, leaped at Snow White.

The Three Sisters Raising Project restart

This story is set shortly before the game in *Magical Girl Raising Project restart* begins.

The Three Sisters Raising Project restart

Gazing ahead, they saw a wasteland spread before them. Not even a single weed grew in the barren ground, and dust scattered through the wind. When they looked to the right, it was the same, and to the left, identical. Looking up, she saw the sun was glaring bright, and when she turned back, her two younger sisters were there. Sorami's mouth was half-open, eyes squinted as she stared into the distance. Sachiko was curled up, holding her head.

Uluru would have curled up and held her head, too, if she could. But as much as she wanted to throw herself to the ground and deem this whole endeavor impossible, that it had to be a dream or illusion or group hysteria…as the eldest sister in a position of responsibility, Uluru had to face the facts.

That was why Uluru gave the order.

"Line up!"

Sachiko lifted her head from between her arms, and Sorami shot Uluru a skeptical look. "Sis, now isn't the time."

"No, this is precisely the time! And that's why we need to calm down and conduct ourselves as usual!"

Sorami nodded reluctantly, and Sachiko slowly got to her feet. The two of them lined up. Tensing her gut, Uluru yelled in a loud voice that rang out across the wasteland. "Roll call!"

"…One."

"Twooo."

Uluru sucked in a big breath, then blew it out. "Let's go over the details."

"Okaaay."

"We accompanied Lady Puk Puck to the new department."

"Yep."

If it seemed it would prove useful, she would become their sponsor and support them. Otherwise, she would say farewell and put an end to it there. Under those conditions, a certain department had applied for support from Puk Puck.

There were a lot of people who sought backing from a great magical girl like Puk Puck. If you responded to every single one of them, there would be no end to it, but if it was a project worth putting her money and name on, that was something else.

The "Mock Battle Simulator Development Project" created by the newly established IT Department had grabbed hold of Puk Puck's heartstrings, and after giving a look over the documents they'd sent over, she wanted to see for herself what sort of thing this actually was.

If Puk Puck was going out, then that meant a job for the three sisters who were her elite guard. Puk Puck was entrancingly glamorous when she was in excursion mode, changed into a beautiful rococo-style outfit like she'd stepped out of a Fragonard painting. Still the sisters fulfilled their duty as her guards, coming to the workplace where the head of the IT Department would be waiting.

The room looked like a messy little office, nothing worthy of receiving Puk Puck. The only illumination was the dim interior lighting—no windows—dust dancing under the glow. Uluru was privately indignant. *How rude!* she thought, but Puk Puck seemed quite happy.

"I've never been to a place like this. What an interesting world."

Even if it just looked like a messy office, if Puk Puck said so, then it surely was interesting.

The magical girl sitting in the office chair stood and spread her arms. "Welcome, welcome to my world."

Her combination of glasses, lab coat, a revealing swimsuit, hair that was hardly even brushed, and a cube puzzle hanging from her neck was totally incoherent, and looking at her gave you a vague sense of unease. It was no use complaining about magical-girl costumes, but it really was rude as a reception to Puk Puck, wasn't it? *Puk Puck got dressed up to go out, so shouldn't the one receiving her at least do her hair properly?* Uluru thought, but when she turned to her superior, Puk Puck still looked happy.

"Hello, Keeky."

"Nice to meet you, Great Puk Puck."

The magical girl Keek rolled up the sleeves of her white lab coat to expose her right hand and exchanged a handshake with Puk Puck. Puk Puck beamed, drawing a smile from Keek as well.

Upon being prompted, Puk Puck sat down on a sofa that had one arm broken, with springs sticking out of it. The three sisters stood behind her in a line. Sachiko tapped the floor with her toe a few times. She probably wanted to sit. Uluru elbowed Sachiko and cleared her throat.

"So then, about the plan I'm trying to—"

The door opened. It was on the opposite side from the door they'd come in. Everyone turned to look at once.

There was a girl wearing a striped, long-sleeved T-shirt, a spiked, leather hair decoration, rough leather pumps, bone-patterned tights, and to finish it off, she held a scary-looking guitar reminiscent of an ax. She greater resembled some punk rocker than a magical girl. Whoever she was, she was certainly a ruffian.

Sorami and Sachiko moved so fast, you wouldn't believe they were usually slow and lazy, moving to guard either side of Puk Puck and entering battle readiness. Standing in front of her master, Uluru drew the gun from her back and was about to raise it like a club, but Puk Puck restrained her with her right hand. "It looks like she's not a bad girl."

"That's right! I'm everyone's idol, Tot Pop!"

Keek sighed with deep and sincere irritation. "I didn't invite you."

"That's not true. We promised we'd hang out together today, right?"

"No, we didn't. I said I couldn't because I have to speak with someone important today."

"So didn't that mean, in other words, you had plans to speak with someone important, but since you got an invitation from Tot, you figured you'd prioritize that?"

"Of course not! Just how badly can you twist someone's words to suit your own interests?! Get out!"

"Now, now," Puk Puck cut in. "Tot, your name was? She didn't come here to do anything bad, right? And I'd feel bad if you got mad at her. Let's all have a nice chat together."

"Okeydoke!" The magical girl who had introduced herself as Tot Pop slid into the room without gaining the permission of Keek, the master of this room, or apologizing to the most important

person present, Puk Puck, and before you knew it, she'd plunked herself down on the spinny chair there, leaning her ax-like guitar beside her.

"What do I do?" Sachiko's expression seemed to say, while Sorami had a look that asked *"What should we do about this?"* as they both turned to Uluru, who helplessly glanced over at Puk Puck. Their beautiful and charming master pointed a smile as gentle as a lamb at the intruder. "What an amazing girl you are."

"Is Tot that amazing?"

"You're not," said Keek. "Forgive me. She messes things up whenever she comes by, so it's best to kick her out."

"It's okay, it's okay." Puk Puck showed absolutely no sign of anxiety. In fact, sounding quite relaxed, she asked, "Could the three of you leave for a bit?"

Uluru, Sorami, and Sachiko, upon receiving this order, were bewildered.

"Huh…? But then…"

"No problem. We'll just be talking, so you don't hafta worry."

"But…"

"Keeky, do you have something like a waiting room?" Puk Puck asked.

"If a storage room works, then over there." Keek snapped her fingers, and in a place where there had been a wall, a pixelated pattern appeared and then dispersed, leaving behind a wooden door.

"Yep, that's fine. Wait there, okay, guys?"

Not given the time to argue, they were shoved into the storage room, the door closing after them. From behind the closing door came Keek's grumpy voice: "Are you seriously not making her leave?" followed by Puk Puck: "I'm sure it'll be more fun to have three chatting than just two," and then the door closed. After that, they didn't hear so much as a pin drop.

"Will things be okay…?" Sachiko tilted her head with concern.

"Well, if Lady Puk Puck says it'll be okay, then I'm sure it will." Sorami's guarantee was totally baseless.

"Nothing about this is okay!!" Uluru yelled. As she swung her arm up, her fist hit some books stacked on the table. The mountain of tomes collapsed. There was the rustling of pages, dust scattering, the sounds of coughing, and a building irritation. Unsurprisingly for a storage space, the place was cluttered. In comparison, the other

room, which Uluru had judged to be too messy for hosting Puk Puck, was a fine reception area.

"This room's pretty awful, huh?"

"Yep, sure is dusty."

"We don't know how long they're gonna be talking next door, so why don't we kinda tidy up a bit so it's a bit more comfortable?"

"Hey, Sorami, now isn't the time to be doing something like that," said Uluru.

"C'mon, you help out, too, sis."

"Let's make it so we can sit down, at least."

"Good grief! Honestly, it's always like this…"

They couldn't even tell how big this room was. Their view was blocked by various kinds of machinery piled up to the ceiling, plus documents and paper stacks and boxes of wood or cardboard and other miscellaneous items, and they couldn't even see where the walls were. Add three magical girls, and it was packed full—they could stand, but they couldn't sit, so in order to make a place for the three of them to take a seat, they engaged in the Sisyphean task of moving things that were stacked on top of one thing to stacked on top of another thing. The two girls picked up things and put them down—Sorami lazily, Sachiko glumly.

Uluru did the same in quite a huff. Moving even one item would scatter dust, and she felt ready to choke. She was holding her right sleeve under her nose, picking up and lowering things with her left hand, when the gun on her back caught on the corner of a table. Annoyed, she smacked the table corner to yank the gun away, and the inertia knocked the machinery piled atop the table down onto the floor. It kicked up more dust, and then there was the click of a switch flipping.

And now, presently, the three sisters were smack-dab in the middle of a wasteland.

"To sum things up…"

"Uh-huh."

"Uluru hit some kind of switch, and then we got flung out here?"

"Don't make it sound like it's Uluru's fault!" Uluru protested.

“I mean, it *is* your fault, Uluru.”

“It’s the fault of whoever carelessly left something like that lying around!”

“Um… So then…” Sachiko looked around the area uneasily. “… Where are we…?”

“I wonder. It kinda doesn’t look like Japan.”

“It doesn’t matter where we are,” Uluru said firmly. “We’re just going to move forward. We’ll find someone. And then we go back. If bandits or brigands or some such show up, then we’ll deal with them—we’re magical girls.”

Uluru tried to draw the gun from her back, but her hand grasped air. “Huh?” She touched her back with her hand, groping. There was nothing in the spot where her gun would normally be. She stroked the spot, then took off her coat and shook it out, but she still couldn’t find the gun. “Uluru’s gun is gone.”

“Whatever, it’s just a toy.”

“Don’t call it *just a toy*! It’s important!”

“Hey.”

Both Uluru and Sorami glanced over at Sachiko. She wasn’t looking at either of them—her eyes were pointed in a completely different direction. They were wide and unblinking as her legs, arms, and body trembled.

“Huh…?”

Beyond her pointed, shaking hand, something writhed. Slowly, quietly, something human-shaped appeared from within the earth. Uluru looked closely and saw what was moving: human skeletons with no muscle, skin, or organs, or anything at all left except for white bone.

Was it magic? Sachiko let out a tiny cry, and when Sorami tried to rush forward, Uluru called out “Stop!” to restrain her. The group of skeletons started running toward them. Their movements were surprisingly light. They were probably coming to attack. Cupping her hands around her open mouth, Uluru yelled out loud at the animate skeletons, “I cast a magic spell on you! If you move from that spot, you’ll die!”

No matter how much it seemed Uluru was lying, even if she actually was lying, she could make whoever heard her words believe they were the truth. This was her magic. But the skeletons were rattling toward them as if they hadn’t heard anything.

Sorami muttered, “Guess they can’t understand words.”

"…Yeah."

"So your magic was pointless, huh, sis?"

"Enough of your nastiness! Come on, let's fight!"

Sorami kicked, Uluru punched, and Sachiko did the same, screaming all the while. Before long, the group of animate skeletons had become a mess of bones, which then scattered into dust and blew off into the wind before vanishing.

The trio stood with their backs together in readiness for a follow-up attack. In the tense atmosphere, an electronic sound rang out, making them all jump. They pulled out their magical phones—Uluru and Sachiko had theirs hanging over their chests while Sorami's was stashed in her backpack. Their screens lit up, and in the middle of each was displayed a message: You have defeated the group of skeletons. You earned eight magical candies.

"What is this? A game?" wondered Uluru.

"So what could magical candy be…?" Sachiko wondered.

"Give me a break," Sorami griped. "The heck is going on?"

The three sat in a circle and discussed. They'd been dumped in some strange place. They'd been attacked by a group of skeletons. Their magical phones were doing things on their own. What was going on? Where was this? What should they do? No time was required to discuss these matters—the answer was displayed on their magical phones.

"Um… *Magical Girl Raising Project…?*" said Sachiko.

"Ohhh, this has gotta be that thing—the mock battle simulator."

"Weren't they trying to get money to develop that?" Uluru asked. "So is it finished?"

"Hmm, more like tutorial mode. So this is basically a trial run, right?"

"There's this option asking if you want to change it to R18 mode—"

Uluru interrupted her immediately. "Sachiko, don't touch anything weird."

"This is my first time being stuck inside a video game."

"Sorami, don't say anything dirty."

"Huh? Ummm, there's nothing dirty about that. What's so dirty about what I said? Is it not okay for me to say *my first time*? 'Cause that's something you normally say, I think."

"Hey…," said Sachiko, her voice shaky. "Look at this."

Over where Sachiko was indicating with a trembling hand was a message: You cannot return to the outside world until you clear the game.

"Ugh, for real? Gimme a break," groaned Sorami.

"Actually…," Uluru said, "if we were here forever, Lady Puk Puck would notice, you know. This game has a creator, so there has to be a way to save us…"

"Hey…," said Sachiko, her voice wavering. "And there's this…"

Another message appeared: Time flows differently inside the game. Three days inside the game is equivalent to one second outside.

"Sachiko! You keep giving us the worst news!" Sorami wailed.

"I mean, I just found it!"

They were supposed to use the magical candies won from defeating monsters to buy equipment and items, and if they beat the boss, the Great Dragon, the game would end, and they'd be freed. In this world, they'd get hungry, too, despite being magical girls, so they had to periodically consume the rations that were sold at the item shop, or all their parameters would decrease, and eventually, they would starve to death.

The more they read, the more they realized how hopeless the rules were. Sachiko already looked to be at death's door, and Sorami slowly shook her head and looked up at the sky. Uluru wanted to burst into tears, too. But as the eldest of the three sisters and captain of Lady Puk Puck's elite guard, she couldn't show tears or make feeble complaints.

"Okay, then first, we search the town. Come on, get up."

In this vast wasteland that stretched out into the horizon, they might run out of strength before they found a town, but the pride and willpower of Puk Puck's elite guard demanded they did everything they could before they finally fell. And so with such tragic but grim determination, they faced the task of finding the first town. As it happened, by looking into the distance from the top of the ruined high-rises that dotted the landscape, they found it rather easily. In the town, there were people walking around dressed in the style of Europe in the Middle Ages, or something of that flavor. Even when three people who were clearly magical girls walked into town, they didn't seem to draw any attention.

"Looks like they're what they call NPCs," said Sorami.

"What are *enpeesees*? Uluru doesn't know about video games, so

explain it so Uluru can understand, too."

"It means non-player character. The characters the computer controls."

"The people who tell you stuff like, *'You gotta equip your weapons, dude!'* Or, like, *'This is such-and-such village,'* right?"

"These look a little better than your usual stock characters."

When they tried talking to the NPCs, they responded properly, in a humanlike manner. If you asked questions, like the name of the town, the location of facilities, the goal of the adventure, or about monsters and such, the characters would respond based on what they knew, and they spoke in different ways depending on their appearances, too. Surprisingly, if Sachiko and Sorami said things like "The sky is about to fall" or "The earth is going to break open," they'd get annoyed, but if Uluru said the same thing, they'd believe it entirely and look frightened. It seemed they were human enough that Uluru's magic to make people believe her lies would work on them.

"That makes me wonder—why are they using Japanese if this is supposed to be like the European Middle Ages?" asked Sorami.

"Let's not talk about that," Uluru replied.

They got the town residents to tell them where the shop was, then headed over. Aside from rations and special passes, the shop also sold weapons. When they got to see a weapon called "Rifle," it was just about identical to Uluru's gun.

"They have it! Uluru's gun!" Uluru cried.

"Ummm, to get the goods, you pay the shop with magical candy… Oh, shoot. We can't buy back your gun with the candy we have now, sis," said Sorami.

"It's not *buying it back*! Don't say it like Uluru pawned it!"

They couldn't trick the owner of the shop with magic to get the weapon for cheap. It seemed to be made so that they had to make a payment of a fixed sum of magical candy, or they wouldn't get the item, no matter what.

"Anyway, we have to buy weapons," said Uluru.

"Yeah," Sorami agreed. "That's a good strategy."

The "strategy for this type of game" that Sorami described wasn't that complicated. First, they'd save up magical candy, then buy weapons, and with those new weapons, they'd aim for new areas.

Just as Uluru's weapon, the Rifle, could only be equipped by

Uluru, there were established character weapons for Sorami and Sachiko, too. When they got to see what the weapons were, both of them sighed.

"My weapon is nunchaku made from smartphones tied together with string…," grumbled Sorami. "What even is that aesthetic? Couldn't they have come up with something a little better?"

"Mine's just a knife…," said Sachiko. "It feels like they couldn't really think of anything, so they went with whatever, y'know? I've only ever used a knife in training, though."

At the shop, they bought rations, then wandered around the wasteland in search of someplace where the skeletons would appear. Once they found some, they defeated every one of them. The skeletons looked scary, but mere animations were no match for the three sisters. Even Sachiko, who was often scolded for her passivity in combat training, gleefully kicked, punched, and tossed the skeletons around, rendering them into mere piles of bones.

"You're real cheery, sis," Sorami said to her. "I thought you hated fighting."

"I just haven't really had the opportunity to hit an opponent that's okay for me to hit."

"I feel like you said something real scary…"

Uluru and Sorami both knew that at times like these, the one who would pull the craziest stunts when she was backed into a corner was Sachiko. Or rather, just about anyone who served Puk Puck would know that. It wasn't bad for Sachiko to have something she could vent a bit of stress on.

Once they had used up their rations, the sisters returned to town, where they restocked their inventory and then headed out into the wastelands once again. Each time they repeated this, they got more efficient about it. They made notes of the skeleton spawn points and visited those locations directly to decrease their use of recovery items, slowly starting to cover a broader area.

At last—at long last—they'd saved up enough candy to buy a set of new weapons.

With the Rifle Uluru had so badly wanted now in her hands, the group ventured out into the wasteland. Uluru swiftly drew her gun from her back and readied it.

There was a dry sound and a little burst on the ground about twenty yards ahead.

"Huh?"

All three of them made sounds simultaneously.

Thick smoke rose from the mouth of the gun, the stench of it further emphasizing its presence. It had seemed it was based off Uluru's gun, but the particulars were slightly different. On the gun barrel there was an engraving in katakana that read, *Rifle*.

There was a clap on Uluru's shoulder, and when she turned around, Sorami stood there, looking tired. "Sis…let's turn ourselves in. We've gotta make the crime a little lighter, at least."

"Why?! For what?! How?!"

"A real rifle is kinda a no-go, yeah? It's illegal in this country, after all."

"This is a video game! We're in a game, so it's okay! It's normal to fire a gun in a game, right?!"

"Ah, the skeletons are coming!"

"Come on!" said Uluru. "Enough with your babbling and let's fight!"

Uluru had always longed for a real gun. She would grind her teeth and think, *If only this weren't a toy cork gun, I could do a much better job as Puk Puck's guard*. Now, she had that real gun—its firm weight, the smell of gun smoke—a fearsome weapon that could destroy her target with a simple pull of the trigger.

Among the group of skeletons was a red skeleton that stood out particularly.

"What's that?" Sorami wondered. "A rare monster?"

"What's a rare monster?"

"It means a monster that's stronger than normal. They give you tons of experience and drop lots of gold…or in this game, candies and rare items and stuff."

Seemed like this was an enemy worth defeating. Uluru fixed her aim on the red skeleton and pulled the trigger, sending a bullet flying through the air. Her second bullet flew off in some other direction while the third hit the ground. The recoil was too strong and she couldn't fire continuously; before she had time to be surprised, the group of skeletons were right up ahead, and now that they were this close, it was faster to just hit them with the gun than to shoot bullets. She used her new weapon to strike the skeletons. When she hit, they cracked, and when she swung, they went to pieces. Uluru was semi-satisfied by the strength of her weapon as the battle came to a close.

And then Sorami muttered, "Sis…your aim was totally off,

huh?"

"Shut up."

"You were actually aiming for the red guy, weren't you?"

"I said shut up. The recoil on this gun is way too strong."

Leaving aside Uluru's firing accuracy—she was made to swear that she would never shoot when Sorami and Sachiko were in front of her—they had confirmed the strength of their weapons. The smartphone nunchaku and knife were actually pretty powerful, too. *We can work with this*, Uluru thought as they circled around the border of the new area they'd already discovered, and at the checkpoint they'd found, they pulled out their pass and stepped into the new area: the mountain region. Unlike the wasteland, the paths had ups and downs and twists and turns, so they couldn't quite secure themselves a direct route. Furthermore, there were new monsters—not skeletons, but muscle-bound men over six feet tall with jagged, uneven fangs and sharp horns. That's right: These were creatures like the *oni* from old legends.

Equipped in battered leather armor, spears, and hammers, even just based on looks alone, they seemed stronger than the skeletons.

"But you know—compared to trained magical girls like us, skeletons and *oni* are no different," said Uluru.

"Who are you trying to convince there, sis?"

"Ah, they're here!"

Baring their fangs in naked rage, five *oni* rushed at the trio. They fought back. One minute later, all three girls were scrambling around the mountains trying to escape.

"The heck?! Why are they so strong?!" Uluru wailed.

"Putting those things right after the skeletons—this game is *so* broken!" Sorami agreed.

When Uluru swung her gun at the *oni*, they blocked her strike without difficulty, while if Sorami tried to block an attack with her smartphones, she wound up flying through the air. Even when Uluru tried to deceive them, they wouldn't listen at all.

"Sometimes ogres will speak *oni*, y'know," said Sorami. "Sis, say something in *oni* language."

"Do you think I can speak *oni*?!"

Each and every *oni* was as fast as a magical girl and even stronger. Now the group of *oni* was behind them, chasing them and howling. The girls were gradually getting away, but on the other hand, that meant even a magical girl's legs were only fast enough to

barely escape these creatures.

"My magical phone says ogres are a lot stronger than skeletons."

"Yeah, that's putting it lightly!"

While running from the *oni*, they encountered different *oni*, and ran some more, and encountered more, and ran again, and in the end, they got chased by a massive group of more than fifty *oni*, until they somehow managed to make it back to the town. Perhaps because it was, as Sorami described, a "video game trope," the *oni* didn't come and attack them in the town.

The trio went into the tavern, putting their heads together to discuss. They couldn't beat the *oni* at this rate. Maybe they should buy the new equipment being sold in the mountain town, but if they couldn't defeat the *oni*, they couldn't save up any candy, either.

Despite their misgivings, the trio understood what they could do in order to stock up on candy. They returned to the earlier area and started grinding for candy by fighting the skeletons. The red skeletons that spawned occasionally dropped the most candy. As usual, Uluru never hit with her gun, but slowly, bit by bit, they saved up their candy.

Five days after returning to the previous area, finally, they had stocked up on enough candy to be able to buy a new set of weapons. Once again, they went into the mountain area, and they headed for the town cautiously to avoid encountering any *oni*, until finally, at last, they were able to buy new weapons: the Rifle +1, the Smartphone Nunchaku +1, and the Knife +1.

It had taken time. It had taken effort. They'd taken detours. So that made it emotional. The three of them tried to order wine at the tavern, but they didn't have enough candy, so they ordered water and quietly had a toast. Now, their counterattack would begin.

One hour later, the three of them were scrambling around the mountain path trying to escape.

"Why?!" Uluru cried. "It wasn't that we couldn't win because our weapons were too weak?!"

"No, they're clearly that much stronger," said Sorami.

"There's no way… It's impossible…," Sachiko moaned.

After being chased by nearly a hundred *oni*, the three of them discussed at the tavern. In every way the *oni* were too strong. This was supposed to be a game to train magical girls, but at this rate,

it'd be game over before they ever completed their training.

"Are we…too weak?" Sorami wondered.

"There's no way the elite guard of the honorable Puk Puck would be weak! The enemy is absurdly strong!"

"Maybe…they're enemies…we don't have to fight?"

Sachiko's suggestion made Sorami clap her hands. "Ohhh, that could be it. Games are like that sometimes, y'know?"

"Ummm, I don't really get it, but that means we should avoid fighting, right?" said Uluru.

The three of them stopped operating as warriors, instead acting entirely as scouts, or reconnaissance soldiers, or something in that vein. They didn't fight the *oni* directly. They avoided detection, finding their foes first, waiting for them to pass as they made progress—albeit slowly.

By doing this, they were now able to avoid fighting *oni*. However, more struggles awaited. Unlike in the wasteland, in order to get from the mountains to the next area, there were lots of tasks involving coming and going to the same locations, like to go find the app "Translator Buddy" or to go on some errand, or to use that app to decipher ancient writing to solve a puzzle, encountering *oni* all along the way; and Sachiko's face got paler and paler. Uluru tossed the puzzle-solving off to Sorami completely and focused on supporting Sachiko. No matter how much praise she showered Sachiko with—"You're amazing; you're great; if not for you, we'd all be in trouble"—it did nothing to improve Sachiko's pallor.

They sneaked their way through the mountains at a snail's pace for two weeks in total, and around the time Uluru thought Sachiko's nerves had to be at their limit, finally, they opened the path onward. The trio entered a new region: the cave area.

Finally, no more running from *oni* every day. As Uluru was feeling relieved, what appeared before them were fifty feet long, with a hundred-foot wingspans, scaled thickly to repel bullets, sharp-fanged with strong jaws that would shatter rocks, and breathing scorching flame: dragons.

They just went into a brief fight, ready to flee, and that was enough to make them understand painfully well exactly how strong the enemy was. They turned and ran, coming out from the cave entrance, and feeling heat, she looked to the side and saw the earth there was scorched, smoke hanging over it.

"If you leave the cave, the monsters won't follow you, but the

area outside the cave is constantly being targeted by satellites, and lasers will snipe you…is what it says," said Sachiko.

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

The three magical girls went back into the cave and ran around, trying to escape from the dragons. Sachiko was slow and almost got caught in a dragon's claws. Uluru cried out, "Sachiko!"

Uluru body-slammed her from the side, shoving her away, and the dragon's claws swiped through air. But though Sachiko had avoided getting hit, the wind pressure of the slice alone nearly sent her flying. She would have been more than just injured if that thing had touched her.

Uluru did one spin in a forward roll and instantly rose to her feet again to avoid the dragon's follow-up attack. Sachiko set her hand on the ground to get up as well. A click sounded, and the spot where Sachiko had placed her hand sank down. Before they could even be surprised, there was an explosion, blasting Sachiko away.

"Sachiko!"

Flung by the explosion, Sachiko accelerated, rolling over the ground. And ahead of her were sharp rocks.

"Sis, watch out!" Sorami rushed to her, thrusting out both hands to shove the rolling Sachiko to the side. Sachiko's roll turned at a ninety-degree angle, and she avoided the sharp boulders to tumble off a cliff.

"S-Sachikoooooooo!"

While somehow managing to rescue Sachiko, who passed out at the bottom of the cliff, they encountered more dragons, and Uluru hoisted Sachiko over her back and started running. Scorched by flames, dodging claws and fangs, wondering, *Was there anything like this in the mountain area?!* and scrambling, they fled into the village.

"What was that…?" Uluru asked.

"I don't know…," said Sorami.

"I wanna go hooome…," Sachiko wailed.

The *oni* were strong enough that the trio could manage somehow so long as they fought like their lives depended on it. But those same tactics wouldn't work on something as strong as a dragon—the girls would just be killed. Uluru was not going to fight that.

"Who said the *oni* were strong only 'cause you don't have to fight them…?" Uluru moaned.

"Gee, sis, you sure like pinning the blame on someone else…,"

Sorami shot back.

"I wanna go hooooome…," Sachiko sobbed.

What kind of magical girls had the creators assumed would play this game? If a newbie magical girl were to play it, wouldn't it just end without her being able to do anything? Uluru couldn't understand.

"There's got to be something… Some way out…"

"Anyway, let's try checking out the shop…?" Sorami suggested.

So first, they figured they'd look at the shop and found there were new products on sale. Aside from things like weapons, rations, recovery medicine, and the passes, they were selling some mystery item called *R*.

"What's this?" Uluru wondered.

"Ummm…looks like it's kind of like a lottery. It says an item'll come up at random," Sorami answered.

"Random, huh?"

"Okay, then you try it, Sachiko. If we get a good item out of this, then we'll be able to move forward, right?"

"Yeah… Okay." Paying one hundred candy from their area-clear bonus, Sachiko pulled a slip of paper from the lottery box. When she handed it to the shopkeeper, they exchanged it for a food ration.

"A hundred candy for a ration…?"

"I mean, it's kinda like a participation trophy, y'know? Like how the downtown lotteries'll give you tissues."

"So then if we pull more, we'll win something good, right? Okay, Sachiko, draw another."

If Sachiko drew a good item, Uluru would praise her real hard for it. Or so she figured, but Sachiko ended up drawing food rations four times in a row—putting the trio in the red, naturally.

"Hey, Sorami," said Uluru. "What's going on?"

"Look, I dunno what the win rate is like. It's common enough with *gacha* games that you can draw a thousand times and still never get a winner."

"There isn't some trick to that box, is there?"

"Oh, maybe there is."

"Go try checking it out. You can do that with your magic, can't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure."

Sorami approached her *R* box and covered the hole where you

stuck your hand in, then suddenly looked up. With a startled expression like she'd realized something, she looked up at the sky for about thirty seconds, and Uluru reached out to her, about to demand, *"Just what on earth are you doing?! How long does this even take?"*

But Sorami swept aside Uluru's outstretched hand with her own right hand and nodded. "I get it."

"You get what? What's inside the box?"

"No, not that box. The inside of this game is basically a closed space, right? So then I can use my magic on it. I just realized."

Sorami's magic was that she would know what was in a present without pulling off the ribbon. Any closed space—be it a box or a disk or a hut or an apartment—she could determine every single thing about its contents. Even if they were trapped inside this game, precisely because they were trapped, she could learn everything about it.

Sachiko laid her hands on Sorami's shoulders and shook her. The color had returned to her once half-dead expression. Her eyes were shining with hope. Uluru surely had a similar look on her face. "So then that means you understand this game perfectly now!"

"Hey, sis, stop shaking me."

"Yes! Yes, yes, yessss!" Sachiko cried. "This isn't just having a strategy guide—it's like playing the game with a cheat code. So then we've basically already won, right? Let's go home right away!"

"It's not gonna work like that, though…" Sorami was somber, her expression glum. "I guess it'd be faster for you to see it, rather than explaining. It's real close if we run. Now follow me." With that, Sorami immediately took off running.

Uluru and Sachiko exchanged a look, then chased right after her. Sorami was inherently lazy by nature and hated doing any work. That also meant she never pointlessly expended energy. So if she was running, there was a good reason for it.

Magical-girl legs are fast. And with their combat training, the three sisters were leagues faster than average for their kind. With their legs and Sorami's directions, it took them about ten minutes, avoiding dragons twice, and beyond them was waiting, open-mouthed, what Sorami described as "the classic cave you see in a lot of games and stuff."

"Follow in my footsteps. There are traps, so watch out."

Walking after Sorami, who went right in, they went through

crossroads, three-way intersections, and more minute branches, then a hidden door to a hidden hallway. They figured out the treasure chest code in one shot, and then using the key they got from it, they opened a door, and beyond that was something incredible.

"What…is that…?"

"That's the Great Dragon. The thing we have to beat."

The inside was bigger than Puk Puck's castle. The square room was about three to five miles squared—maybe even bigger. The fifty-yard-high ceiling was full of mist to the point that you couldn't see the top. The giant creature sprawled out in the center of the room was just like the dragons you'd see in picture books or manga or video games. Measured from nose to tail, it would probably measure closer to two miles long. And if it spread its wings, it would surely be even bigger.

"Oh, watch out not to enter the room," cautioned Sorami. "'Cause if you take even a step in, it'll breathe fire. It has an instant death effect, so if it hits you, you're done for."

"Um…do you use some kind of special item to defeat it?" Uluru asked.

"Nope, you fight it straight with your own skills."

"What if you equip strong weapons and armor?"

"The game's in tutorial mode, so modifications only go up to +3. Against that thing, it's a difference of about one-ply versus three-ply."

Dragging Sachiko (who had collapsed on the spot) out of the cave, the girls headed to the town Sorami guided them to, paid magical candy at the tavern to order three wines, and took a seat. Uluru punched the table as hard as she could. The wine sloshed hard enough that it nearly spilled. "This is bullshit!"

"Yeah…," Sorami agreed. "Such bullshit. You're totally right this time, sis. Like, a hundred percent."

Sachiko downed her wine without a word, emptying her glass in one go, then face-planted on the table. The other customers and staff briefly shot the trio weird looks before averting their gaze.

"Isn't there some kind of cheat? Like a secret trick?"

"It's made simple 'cause it's in tutorial mode. If we try messing around with it from the inside, it's totally possible for the game to just break, us included. I wouldn't try it."

Sachiko silently picked up Uluru's wine, drank it dry in one go,

and laid facedown again. Uluru glanced over at her but couldn't be bothered to try being of any comfort. Instead, she decided to leave her alone. "There isn't anything like leveling up?"

"This game doesn't have character levels."

"We can't get a critical hit and land a one-hit KO?"

"There's a one in a million chance that we deal any damage, and another one in a million chance it'll result in an instant kill. I don't wanna try that. We'd probably get fried and die before we could touch it."

"What if there's some super-strong support NPC out there somewhere?"

"Not a chance. A training simulator wouldn't need that kind of backup in the first place, right?"

"But Uluru's gotta get back!"

"Well, I've gotta get back, too!" The table shook with a bang. Looking over, Uluru saw Sorami's glass was also empty. Furthermore, Sachiko had the empty wine bottle in her right hand and was banging the butt of it against the table. Her face was red, her eyes glassy.

"Sachiko… Hey, leave this one for us!" said Uluru. "…Wait, does this wine work on magical girls, too?"

"Sis, this is a training simulator for magical girls—of course alcohol's gonna work on us."

There was a rustling as Sachiko spread some papers out on the table. They were the contracts needed to activate her magic. Anyone who signed one would temporarily gain incredible luck but immediately be met with incredible misfortune and wind up dead.

"Let's use these." She didn't merely look drunk; she sounded drunk, too.

"You serious? Come on—if we use them, we'll die."

"Hmph." Sachiko snorted, looking all around. "We should just use them on the monsters."

"No way the monsters would choose to sign the contracts for us."

Sachiko thrust her index finger at Uluru. "You're good at lying, right? So you wheedle them however with your magic, spout some bluff, like if you beat the dragon, you can get a lot of money, or if you beat the dragon, the world'll be saved, and then gather up the *oni* to fight the Great Dragon."

Sorami put her hands up and carefully attempted to calm

Sachiko. “Uh, but, sis. No matter how Uluru tries to lie to them, if they don’t understand what she says…”

“What d’you think the translation app is for?! Figure it out already!”

Sachiko smacked the table with the wine bottle, and Uluru and Sorami looked at each other with a collective “Oh!”

Uluru used the translation app to trick the *oni*: “Defeat the dragon and you’ll get one hundred percent of the profits. Just sign these contracts first.” Once the *oni* did that, the trio guided them to the cave area. The hordes of *oni* were mowed down by the dragon’s tail and burned up by the flames, but one still managed to survive. Sachiko’s magic granted the remaining *oni*’s attack exceptional luck, and the dragon was defeated.

Once the sisters had safely returned from the game, three magical girls welcomed them. Puk Puck and Tot Pop were pleasantly chatting with each other: “We’re all friends now, right?” “Yep!” Keek, meanwhile, was off to the side, slumped in her chair and shaking her head. “The deadline…,” she mumbled. “The deadline is coming…” The three sisters were now beyond caring what had transpired here.

“You three cleared the game, right? Then Keeky wants you to please do this survey,” Puk Puck asked them.

The trio furiously wrote down their gripes with the game, giving it solid ones across the board. Their reviews were scathing: *Raise* R*’s success rate! Lower the difficulty level! The NPCs are annoying! Fuck this shitty game! I feel sorry for anyone who’s forced to play this thing. Whoever made this is evil. The creator should feel bad about themselves!* Once finished, all three of them breathed sighs.

Word has it that ever since that day, none of the sisters ever played another video game.

Are Our Real Lives Fulfilling?

This story is set a while before *Magical Girl Raising Project JOKERS.*

Are Our Real Lives Fulfilling?

“There haven’t been any good jobs recently,” she said with a sigh. The other three girls present had been looking over the menus and discussing with serious expressions: “This one tastes bad.” “This one’s actually okay.” They turned to face the speaker—Kafuria.

“What do you mean by a good job?” asked one of her companions.

Kafuria snorted and took a sip from her cup. Her coffee was already completely cold. “Well, a job you can get lots of money for, of course. What other kind is there?”

“Money, hmm… But what about something a little more extravagant…? Oh, like how about a job where you meet someone?”

“An encounter? I’ve had enough of men.” All three of her companions smirked. Kafuria flicked the empty sugar packet lying beside her saucer, sending it flying to the corner of the table.

“You’re so jaded, Kafuria,” commented her other companion.

“Can you blame me?”

“Seriously, though, it’s all about meeting someone,” said her first associate. “If you can marry rich, then that solves your money problems, right? Oh, though I know you’re not going to meet anyone, Kafuria.”

Kafuria was about to set down her cup rather hard, but then she took a moment to bite her lip lightly before she placed it gently on her somewhat large saucer. If she were to use any additional force, she’d break both the cup and the saucer—and worst case, the table, too. If that happened, they wouldn’t be allowed here anymore.

This place, a cosplay café in a certain prefecture in a certain city, Magical Teatime, loaned out costumes to customers, but said nothing about whether you were allowed to bring your own. However, they also didn’t forbid it. They offered some clarification on dress code, like *“within the range of common sense”* or *“excepting*

anything obscene." It was because these rules were so fuzzy and vague that magical girls could surreptitiously use this place while transformed. This was the only place you'd find, even if you searched all of Japan. It would be a waste if they got themselves banned from the café.

Among all the jumble of decorations were paper chains, shelves lined with plushies and figurines, and posters of anime airing this season as well as some from ten and even twenty years ago. Girls in anime cosplay smiled with the customers, and the mustached, bow-tied owner silently wiped dishes. Magical girls mingled here and there among the clientele. Though the customers and staff might think, *What an amazing cosplay* or *What's with that costume?* they never said that out loud. Occasionally, the girls might be asked if it was okay to take a photo.

Pausing a moment, once she'd calmed herself, Kafuria continued. "I've met a man or two myself. The last time was about two or three years ago, though, when I sneaked into a party at the PR Department."

"Two or three years ago? That's quite a while back, isn't it? And nothing since then…," the pigtailed girl commented.

"I get that you want to make a snide remark, but let's listen to Kafuria's story first. So then what happened?" the masked girl asked.

The background music playing inside the café changed from the opening theme of a battle anime to the ending song of a romcom. With that mellow ballad in the background, Kafuria began, "A man who really came off like a show business type was trying so hard with me. He kept offering cliché compliments, like, 'You have a traditional beauty that the frivolous magical girls in anime lack; you really deserve to be called the magical girl of Japan.' When I asked about him afterward, I found out he was a pretty important person. They said he wasn't from the Magical Kingdom, more like something of an entertainment figure."

"Ohhh, wow. So he was talking to you kinda like, *'You're the idol of the next generation!'"* the masked girl exclaimed.

"Well, he was pretty cagey, though. Like, *'Maybe you're not quite suited to anime.'"*

"What the heck's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, do you think I'm suited to anime?"

"Oh… Um, maybe you don't come off as the hot new thing."

“But he said he wanted to get to know me better and wanted my number.”

“Well, I guess I might call that…a guy who’s honest in a lot of ways.”

There was a smile on Kafuria’s face. Since most of her face was hidden behind a veil, the other girls could only determine she was smiling from her lips. “I gave him a fake number.”

“Huh? …Why’d you do that?”

“You hear lots of stories where you start dating a man who compliments you as a magical girl, but then when he sees what you look like in human form, he treats you like a fraud and dumps you. Am I wrong?”

“Ahhh… Yeah, you’ve got a point.”

“But don’t you think that’s the kind of good one you don’t get that often? You don’t actually have to show him your face as human.”

“Don’t you try to get others to do something you can’t,” said Kafuria. “Oh, talking about unpleasant things makes me thirsty. Pardon me, server. I’d like to add an ‘End of the World Milkshake’ to my order.”

When the costumed staff brought over a cup and set it on the table, a certain someone swiftly snatched it away from Kafuria. With her giant, strangely silver Afro in bizarre combination with the typical fancy magical-girl costume, this girl stood out more than anyone in the café, tilting back the milkshake in an elegant manner that clashed with her fashion sense.

Watching her drink be stolen away, Kafuria’s lips twisted in displeasure. “Auro, why are you taking the milkshake I ordered?”

“Hmm? You didn’t order it for me?”

The other two girls at the table laughed at the same time while watching Kafuria and Auro’s exchange. Kafuria pouted. She wasn’t actually as angry as she acted, and the others understood that.

There were four magical girls who had come that day. They were all freelancers—career magical girls unaffiliated with any organization who made their livelihoods in the magical-girl business.

“There’s nothing more ridiculous than trying to get a man to support you in this industry.”

The magical girl Kafuria—her ability let her know who among a group would be the first to die. When she told people about her

magic, they always looked disturbed. When that was all it was, it was on the better side—it wasn't unusual for people to run away or yell at her. She did personally like her costume, which was in the style of mourning attire, but when she went to fancy events, it stood out in a bad way.

"That's just stuff you tell yourself after it's over. You should've gone out with him right away."

The magical girl wearing a fox mask on the side of her face, Kokuri, used magic to move around spare change at will. However, she could control only one coin at a time, and what's more, she couldn't make it go faster than a human's brisk walking pace. She basically couldn't use her power other than for manipulating a *kokkuri-san*—a Ouija board—however she wanted, but being surprisingly superstitious, Kokuri said, "If I did something like that, I'd get cursed," and didn't use it for ill.

"I am kind of getting a sour-grapes feeling, here."

Negino, whose green hair was tied in pigtails with green onion-shaped clips, was an onion-style magical girl who was always at the top at onion-related events, but it seemed such events were only necessary once a year. She insisted herself that her magic, to "generate the smell of green onions," was more useful than anything when you wanted to enjoy the smell of onions. That, and the group's comebacks to that, was one of their standard jokes.

"A magical girl dating a regular human is nothing but trouble, though."

Auro, who boasted a large silver Afro, simply had a magic Afro. Its magical protection kept her hair from ever getting messed up. She would tuck small items like her magical phone and writing implements into her hair and pull them out when she needed them, and still her Afro would maintain a perfect shape. It was only the people around her, not Auro herself, who felt like the Afro was too big and annoying in small spaces.

Freelancers—those not affiliated with any organization who made their living in the magical-girl business—were treated harshly by magical-girl society. The "normal magical girls" who worked hard to help people without compensation and earned the money to support themselves through other means, saw them as money-grubbers who were anti–public service. The full-time magical girls who received salaries from their work with affiliated various departments in the Magical Kingdom held them in contempt, seeing

them as an undisciplined, greedy, and calculating bunch of hoodlums who weren't talented enough to get real jobs.

It was only a very few specialists who were treated with courtesy. The majority were regarded as trash who weren't able to get salaried legitimately, and though they were mocked, they desperately made livings for themselves.

It wasn't that they were incompetent. And that wasn't just putting on a tough act. An incompetent magical girl couldn't make a living as a freelancer. In this business, where being deceived, used up, and thrown away was a daily occurrence, they survived thanks to their skills.

Negino and Auro were graduates of the circle of mayhem that was the Archfiend Cram School. Negino was among the top six on the ten-thousand-meter dash, while Auro had scored among the best eight in an arm-wrestling championship. But even being this good, since they looked silly and their magic would prompt snickers, they were not invited to join the smaller cliques in the Archfiend Cram School, like the "Four Heavenly Kings" or the "Eight Legions."

Kokuri had become a magical girl from being acknowledged by the Musician of the Forest, Cranberry, who was known for the strictness of her exams. Apparently, Cranberry had praised her enthusiastically: "Even when you get into a frenzy, you maintain a bird's-eye view of yourself, and with great athletic talents and excellent combat sense, you always make the optimal choices. That's the talent most necessary on the battlefield." But even so, the scouts had never come.

Kafuria was like them. She wasn't as confident in her skills as the other three, but she was still more physically capable than the average magical girl. Plus, when it came to flying, no one was any match for Kafuria and her wings. Dogfights, high-altitude observation, covert operations, acrobatics—she could do anything. And not just for combat. She was also proficient in mission backup skills, like information analysis, negotiation, even clerical work.

What brought them all together was the one thing they had in common—their rather lackluster magical abilities. They'd found out about one another at a job they'd been hired for and had grumbled about their magic together, and even after finishing the job, they'd agreed to meet regularly despite their differences in ages and careers. And now, they'd built a small little gathering of sorts.

Because they knew their abilities were the kind that would only

ever get them mocked, they made their connection a secret. Leaving aside solo jobs, which were first come, first served, if there was a job for multiple people, then they would share that information, and by accommodating one another, they built a network that benefited everyone. Since no one would guarantee them a regular salary, they had to take care of themselves. And even just complaining to one another at Magical Teatime about people mocking their abilities or laughing at their looks and such—that was meaningful enough.

"I've been stalked before, too," Auro said.

"You? A stalker?" Kokuri mused. "Did they have an Afro fetish?"

"Close. A hair fetish."

"This is why I can't stand men," Kafuria complained.

"Nah, it wasn't a man; it was a woman. A magical-girl stalker."

"Can't stand women, either."

"Kafuria, doesn't that mean you just can't stand people in general regardless of gender?"

"You're young, Negino, so you don't understand how ugly people are."

"We're the same age."

"Anyway," said Kokuri, "what happened with your stalker in the end, Auro?"

"She started following me one day and then dropped me out of the blue, like, 'Your hair is very beautiful, but it's just not quite to my tastes.' Can you believe that?"

"Wow, rude."

"Just awful," Kafuria agreed.

"Far too mean," said Negino.

All four of them sighed, then sipped from the drinks in front of them. Only Kafuria lacked a drink—since Auro had stolen it—and so she moistened her throat with a cup of water. "Money over love, after all."

"I suppose a nice job won't simply fall into our laps, will it?" said Negino.

"I hear Magical Girl Resources is recruiting people on a temp basis," said Auro. "What about them?"

"I hear they pay quite well," Kafuria added.

"Then it'd be a good idea to check 'em out," said Kokuri.

"How about the Department of Research and Development?"

Negino asked.

"Perhaps this is bias on my part…," said Kafuria, "but I feel they'd treat you like a research subject."

Kokuri nodded. "Ohhh, I believe it."

"Since all of us have rare magic," Auro agreed.

"Speaking of not wanting people to see your pretransformation form," Kokuri said, "it'd be pretty sad if you were too embarrassed to even let people see your posttransformation form, huh?"

This time, they all laughed together. Or maybe it would be more accurate to call it a bitter laugh.

They spent a while chatting about good jobs they'd had in the past, until finally, when there was nothing more to talk about besides the bad economy—at which point Auro started plucking at her hair with her right hand—they called it a day. Auro had the habit of fiddling with her hair when she started getting sick of a discussion. The other three were aware of it, and while they laughed at Auro's lack of focus, they accepted it.

Pulling a shawl over her shoulders as minimal cover to hide her wings, Kafuria left the shop. At times like these, a sensible magical girl would turn back to human before heading home. Kafuria didn't do that because it had been too much trouble to get changed, and she hadn't wanted to do more laundry, so she'd transformed while in her pajamas to go out. So she had no choice but to return as a magical girl.

Though she had a mourning-wear motif, her clothing wasn't actually mourning attire. Someone in a getup like this walking around town stood out a lot. Even removing the veil, the outfit would pass inside a cosplay café only. Nonetheless, Kafuria kept it on—it was a hassle otherwise. She rather pointlessly complimented herself for at least having enough common sense not to think, *I don't mind if anyone sees me, so I'll just fly back*.

Once they saw Kafuria, the high school kids whispered to each other. An old woman went, "Oh my," her expression surprised. A child called out loud and tried to point but was restrained by their mother. If Kafuria were to roll up her veil and show her face now, then those nasty comments from the shadows would turn into remarks of shock and awe, and back when Kafuria had just become a magical girl, that would have satisfied her pride.

She didn't think about doing that now. At this point, she was sick of it.

The things she talked about with her friends had changed as the years passed, too. *"I pity those salaried magical girls, being so restricted; they don't have any freedom. Magical girls should live the freelance life—we have the freedom magical girls should have!"* That was how they'd talked in the old days.

None of them said things like that now. They envied the salaried, and if possible, they wanted to become like that. It was because they couldn't that they were forced to be freelance, keeping their eyes wide open in search of profitable jobs.

Lining up at the bus stop, she got on board, ignoring the stares all around her. Seeing an open window seat on the right, second back from the front row, she was about to walk to it when there was a poke on her shoulder.

"You dropped this."

It was a boy who looked to be in his preteens. He wasn't at all bothered by Kafuria's unusual appearance, offering her a handkerchief with a natural smile. The pattern on it was familiar. It was hers.

"Oh, thank you." She expressed her gratitude and accepted it, then took her seat and closed her eyes. In her mind appeared the man from the PR Department who had complimented her for her traditional beauty.

She'd spoken about it in a lighthearted manner with her friends earlier, but her worries about it were more earnest. The man had complimented her for how attractive she was, but when she had asked him, "So then could you make me into an anime as well?" he'd clearly shaken his head to say no. He'd said flatly that she wasn't suited to anime.

That had made Kafuria angry, but thinking over it afterward, she thought he'd actually been sincere in his attitude. A man who was used to seeing the magical girls of the PR Department, those you might call the crystallization of glamour, had complimented Kafuria outside of work. She didn't even want to count how many times she'd thought she should have given him her number, how many times she'd rejected that idea, and how many times she'd regretted it.

She shook her head. It was far too much for her imagination to be jumping from a boy who'd picked up her handkerchief without being intimidated by her outfit to the man who'd once complimented her appearance.

She looked out the window. The frog statue in front of the drugstore had fallen over.

Kafuria had already forgotten how she'd felt when she'd first become a magical girl. It wasn't like she didn't remember the time when she'd started to realize that maybe her magic was a dud, but she didn't want to think back on it, so she didn't.

Kafuria returned her attention to the inside of the bus and slightly squinted her right eye under her veil.

It was the weekend, so maybe that was why the bus was fairly crowded. All sorts of people aside from Kafuria were occupying the seats. The one with the skull mark hanging over his head was a boy sitting in front of her who looked about middle school age. It was the boy who'd picked up her handkerchief. Earlier, she'd been face-to-face with him, and he'd filled most of her field of view, so she'd ignored the skull mark. But even when there were other people in her field of view, the skull mark continued to float over his head.

To Kafuria, the skull mark was just part of the background. If she let it bother her every time, she wouldn't be able to live her life. But when it floated over the head of someone young, it did upset her. If it was someone who had been kind to her, then particularly so. It wasn't like she thought people should die by order of age, but there were plenty of people in her field of view who were older than him. Men and women the age of his parents were walking around. An old man leaning on a cane was about to get off the bus, and there was the old woman helping him out, and the old man passing by the boy's side, walking to the seat behind him—there were lots of people packed into her field of view, so it really was depressing that the first of them to die would be a young boy.

She sighed.

The skull was not at all absolute. When people found out about the skull, by Kafuria's intervention, their futures might change. On the other hand, they might not change at all, or they might change for the worse. Kafuria herself didn't know what to do to get what kind of result. But if she did nothing, then it would never change.

Regardless, she didn't think to intervene. She could follow the boy, continue to watch him from the shadows, and make him see a doctor before he was struck with an incurable disease; or she could grab him and fly into the air if it seemed he was going to get in an accident. Then the skull mark floating above his head might disappear, but it would simply wind up floating over someone else's

head. What would become of Kafuria's life if she were to go try saving every single person? And even if it was just this boy, she didn't know if his death would be in ten seconds, or ten years.

So Kafuria wouldn't save him. Even if she felt bad about it, she'd act like she hadn't seen the skull mark.

The bus stopped in front of the supermarket, and passengers got on and off. There were more of the former, crowding the bus even further. Even though it was winter—no, because it was winter and the heat was on—it was stuffy. Kafuria flapped her veil to fan her face.

The bus departed. Kafuria turned her eyes forward once more, then scowled under her veil.

Something strange was going on. A skull was floating over the boy sitting in the seat ahead of her. This was no different from before. But there was also one floating over the woman who sat next to him, who was in her twenties. There were also skulls floating over the pair of teen girls sitting in the seats right across the aisle from them.

Kafuria's magic wouldn't measure strictly into units of 0.00000 whatever seconds. Based on her experience thus far, she figured it counted people who would die within about one second as simultaneous deaths, and she knew that when there were multiple people who would die at the same time, skulls would float above all their heads.

The two girls seemed to know each other, but the boy and the woman looked like they just happened to be riding at the same time, and they weren't talking to each other. Kafuria slid her hand under her veil to rub her eyes and looked ahead one more time. Skulls were floating above the heads of all four: the boy, the woman, and the two girls. Now she noticed—there was one more person with a skull floating above their head. It was the driver.

An order of death that was highly unnatural did, in a way, also operate as a premonition. It was an accident. A fuel tank or engine explosion? The positioning was wrong. Falling from somewhere, crashing into something, getting caught in an explosion—whatever was going to happen, it would be a disaster.

Kafuria reached out to mash the buzzer. She had to get off right now, no matter what. She didn't know specifically what sort of disaster would befall this bus, but it was clear that something was going to happen. She couldn't remain here so casually.

Hitting the buzzer over and over, she called out, “Pardon me! My stomach hurts! There’s a hospital right over there!”

She stepped up to the front of the bus, and people started murmuring like crazy. “Is she having some sort of flare-up? No, maybe it’s labor pains.” In times like these, the trick was to make people think of you as a big hassle. Before long, the bus stopped on the shoulder of the road, and Kafuria paid her fare and got off. After getting off, she turned back to see the multiple skull marks were still floating there.

“Bad luck, begone,” she muttered and swiftly left.

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Five minutes later, the bus was at the stop in front of the middle school. If it had been a weekday, all the kids on the way home from school would have come piling on. Since it was a weekend, it was just one or two people getting off. But the bus didn’t move. This was because Kokuri had grabbed onto the back of the bus, and she was making a five-hundred-yen coin repeatedly go back and forth inside the change machine to overfill it with jingling coins. The driver panicked and called the bus company over and over; the passengers were astir as Kokuri’s magic kept the change machine spouting like the Merlion. The coins it spat up rolled on the floor, while kind passengers scooped them up for the driver.

Checking on the bus from the air, Kafuria was satisfied that the sabotage had gone well.

Flying in the sky during the day, even if she was going fast, increased the chances that she would be spotted. The Magical Kingdom did not like it when magical girls appeared in records as mysterious phenomenon or urban legends—however, this was an emergency situation, so she couldn’t be fussing over the little things.

She would leave the bus to Kokuri. Kafuria had told her to run if she thought anything was about to happen. Kokuri wouldn’t make that sort of mistake. Right now, she was there to buy them even a little bit of time to keep the bus from going anywhere.

Right after complaining of a stomachache and getting off the bus, Kafuria had called the friends she’d just been hanging out with and asked them to come meet her. If a big, sturdy vehicle like a bus

got into an accident, then it was abnormal for all the people sitting at the front to die at about the same time, and Kafuria might not be able to prevent it on her own. Multiple magical girls were necessary. You could always rely on numbers.

From the air, Kafuria searched along the bus's route for anything that looked like it would cause an accident. She found it immediately, zooming toward the bus along the major artery over the speed limit and weaving through traffic. It was a tanker truck. Kafuria flew lower and took a look through the windshield. The driver was nodding off. At this rate, even if they got the bus out of the way, it was going to cause a major accident somewhere. Kafuria went for a higher altitude again, following after the tanker truck as she sent a message to Auro and Negino with her magical phone.

Found the vehicle that seems to be the cause. Tanker truck, driver asleep at the wheel. Can you see him from there?

She could see Negino on the sidewalk thrusting her hands at the tanker. The aroma of green onions was powerful, and it had an effect like smelling salts. The driver lifted his sagging head. How could you stay asleep with the smell of green onions filling the inside of your vehicle? But there was one problem: It seemed Negino had gotten too enthusiastic, and the driver choked. The tanker wove across two lanes. The light vehicle running beside it jerked the wheel over as well. It somehow recovered to park on the shoulder of the road, but the tanker truck was completely out of control. It was a good thing he'd woken up, but now there were new issues to deal with.

Just then, a silver sphere jumped out in front of the tanker truck. It was Auro. Seen from above, her Afro was so big that Kafuria could see only the girl's hair.

In a forward-hunched stance like in American football, Auro thrust her head to the front, and the Afro took the speeding tanker head-on. Auro's hair was, at all times, perfectly in place. She said that even if she were wreathed in flames and Auro herself were about to burn to a crisp, her hair alone would remain. Catching the impact of the tanker truck, the hair took no damage, stopping it gently. But Auro couldn't take the momentum, and still with a grip on the bumper through her hair, she was flying back across the

road.

Negino leaped out into the road and grabbed on behind Auro, then Kafuria dived down from the sky above to grab on behind her. The three magical girls all struggled against the tanker with all their might, and the driver had probably stepped on the brakes, too. There was the screeching of brakes, drawing long rubber marks along the pavement until the truck came to a stop, whereupon Auro, Negino, and Kafuria immediately ran off the road and up the side of a nearby building to evacuate to the roof.

Vehicles were stopped all around and people were gathering. Police cars and ambulances were coming. The driver of the tanker got out of his truck, coughing like he was in pain.

Negino smiled. “Maybe I overdid it a bit with the smell, huh?”

“This is no laughing matter,” chided Kafuria.

“Come on, it all worked out in the end. Anyway, it’s too dangerous for a tanker driver to be that tired on the job, right? The company must be really pushing him, don’t you think?”

Auro put her hand to her mouth and smiled. “If we work this well, this might turn into a profitable job for us.”

“Think about that sort of thing later. I’m going to go check on the bus.”

Kafuria flew off. She still couldn’t relax until she checked the skull marks in the bus again. While flying through the sky toward the bus, she smiled a little. It had been a long time since she’d used her magic to help people… No, maybe it was the first time she had legitimately succeeded. And with the smell of onions, coin manipulation, and the big Afro getting in on the action, this was the kind of once-in-a-lifetime event that would probably never happen again no matter how many lives she lived. At their next meet-up, the four girls should try discussing how they could use their magical abilities to help people.

The Elf of the Inspection Department

This story is set before *Magical Girl Raising Project limited*.

The Elf of the Inspection Department

That day, the Inspection Department was in a flurry starting first thing in the morning. They were set to hold an event for visiting audit students—specifically, a seminar on arrest techniques. The entire department staff had been mobilized to peel every single mat out of the dojo, clean the place up, prepare food and drinks, check the program, set up seats for the guests, and various other miscellaneous tasks. They were worked so hard that none of them had a free moment to even sit down.

The event had been launched due to the whims of their superiors, but it hit those on the ground level the hardest. In the Inspection Department, from the department chief down to the lowliest inspectors, no one complained, griped, grumbled, or whined. Keeping any thoughts like *Damn them for creating this hassle for us* to themselves, they solemnly got everything ready.

Then they received unexpected news.

There was a kidnapping. The culprit was a magical girl. The location was a provincial city in a certain country in South America.

They were already so busy, and now there was a big incident. The Inspection Department had jurisdiction over the investigation of any crime involving magical girls in the human world—independent of the Magical Kingdom's own authority—including the right of arrest. When crime occurred, they took on a police-like role. The whole department went into a furor from top to bottom, and then they received even more big news.

There was a bank robbery. The culprits were all magical girls. The location was New York.

This was now no time for a seminar on arrest techniques. Though the Inspection Department was called the police of magical-girl society, there was a far lower crime rate among magical girls, so there weren't all that many dramatic arrests.

This meant all the staff were panicking.

“Split the personnel in two!”

“Hana, you handle the robbery! Apparently, they have a magical girl who called out her move name when firing a beam! There’s a possibility she’s an Archfiend Cram School wannabe!”

“Get us some transport, come on! Get the magic carpets out from the storehouse!”

“Chief, the magic drug inventory is in the storage center!”

In a great uproar like an unseasonal storm, the magical girls and mages in charge of command at the scene leaped out one after another, and only those upper-ranked magical girls, who would normally never be acting as reception, like the department chief and the vice department chief, remained. Following which, the visitors coming for the seminar, who knew nothing of the affairs of the Inspection Department, showed up one after another.

Now the bosses were forced to act as receptionists, something they were quite unused to. Hot-blooded visitors such as students from the Archfiend Cram School and agents of the Department of Diplomacy came to butt in, saying things like, “If you’re having so much trouble, then why don’t I help you out with these incidents?” causing even more hassles.

They scrambled to deal with everyone and send them home, and by the time they were finally all gone, the sun was already directly overhead. Since they had not yet resolved the incidents, the real work was starting now. Having a proper command was what enabled soldiers to fight with all their strength. Once the reception work they were so inexperienced at was finished, the bosses ran off to the office in order to handle miscellaneous tasks such as helping the operators and setting up the headquarters. The Inspection Department was capable of flexible division of labor during emergencies.

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Filru, who worked at a magical-girl prison, had two reasons for attending the arrest techniques seminar; one was more of a pretense, and the other was closer to her true intentions.

The former reason was that she wanted to learn arrest techniques to polish her combat skills and become a better jailer. The latter reason, meanwhile, was that if she took the arrest

techniques seminar and got the certificate, she would get a five-thousand-yen special skills fee added to her current base pay.

Ostensibly, magical-girl departments wanted to focus functions in one place, which may have been why so many of them were located in the Tokyo area. They said you could find the entrances only through strange and mysterious triggers, like going back and forth between buildings forty-five times or doing a handstand for eleven and a half minutes in a back alley.

The Inspection Department was one such institution, but you didn't need such troublesome ceremonies if you used their long-distance travel gate, which made it easy to go between divisions.

Though Filru worked in a prison in America, she was from Japan and still lived there. She used the gates frequently to come and go between the two nations, so this was less of a trip than going back to visit her parents—it didn't even feel like a little outing to her. *Guess I might as well buy some gifts for my coworkers at the prison before I go back*, she would think whenever she was in Japan.

First, she set her palm on the biometric authentication, then input the password and typed in the number for the Inspection Department, which she'd made a note of, then passed through the magic gate in the prison. At a glance, this gate, developed from the concentration of the best of modern magic technology, appeared to be nothing more than an arch made of rough, ugly concrete, but it could instantly transport you to and from the important bases that dotted each region.

Passing through the gate, she was enveloped in light, and immediately, the light faded. She was in a completely different building from the prison where she'd once stood. But something was off. When she stepped out from the gate and spoke to the front desk right ahead, a pair of receptionist magical girls with an intimidating bearing and look in their eyes insisted, "We've never heard of such an event." They said they'd inquire about it and made her sit down on the sofa, then after being made to wait an hour and a half after that, finally, they answered, "This isn't Inspection, it's the Department of Diplomacy."

Filru was indignant, wondering why she'd been made to wait an hour and a half for them to tell her something so basic, but venting her frustration at the Diplomacy reception wasn't going to change the situation for the better. Besides, the receptionists were really intimidating—too scary for her to yell at. And anyway, the

one who'd screwed up on the gate settings and come to the wrong location had been Filru. There was no one else who could resolve her problem.

With a bit of negotiation, she got to use Diplomacy's magic gate. She somehow managed to set it up after struggling with the different interface and constantly checking the manual. She went through the gate and emerged in a place nothing like the oppressive Department of Diplomacy. The passersby were like models or celebrities. Filru was impressed. "Wow, this is different from Diplomacy and the prison." When she explained her situation to the reception, she was told, "This isn't Inspection. It's the PR Department." She stomped her foot but figured that explained why everyone around here looked so glamorous.

Grabbing a mascot character walking around who looked like a ferret, she requested, begged, threw herself at it, and had it help her with the settings, and after making sure to check her destination, she used the magic gate.

Coming out of the gate, she found herself in an aged wooden building like the old-fashioned schools she'd seen in movies. Both the black-painted bare concrete of the Diplomacy interior and the PR Department wall material, coated with a pearl white you could practically see your reflection in, were quite new, compared to this place.

Filru did get a sense of a backbone from it—it was simple and sturdy, practical, or rather, *"What's the point of using money just for looks?!"* Gathering herself, Filru passed through the entrance and headed for the reception, but there was nobody there. There was also no call bell.

"Pardon meeee, is anyone heeere?"

No response. She also didn't get the impression that anyone was coming. There was no bell or buzzer there to call anyone, either. She called out once more, a little louder, but after she'd waited three more minutes, there was still no response. Even after she screamed at the top of her lungs and waited five more minutes—still no one. She was a bit worried but figured that the seminar must already have begun. The whole Inspection Department had to be out for the seminar. That had to be why there was no one here to respond to her call.

Given the situation, it'd probably have been best to give up, but she didn't want to give up. It would be aggravating to have spent all

this time on nothing. Even if it was Filru's fault that she'd screwed up at the beginning, it was the Department of Diplomacy's fault that she'd gotten detained there for so long. If she explained that properly, then couldn't she be allowed to participate in the seminar? It would be really awkward to join in after it had already started, but it would also be quite awkward to report that she'd come back without doing anything because she'd been late.

"Excuse meeee! Is there anyone here?" she called out while walking down an old hallway that reminded her of a high school corridor.

After a little walking, she found something like a handmade information sign posted there. There was a hand drawn on it, with its index finger pointing to the right side of the hallway. Underneath was written *Arrest Techniques Seminar*, and there was something written there in terribly chaotic characters. Though she could make out as far as *due to circumstances today*, everything else was so bad, she could barely tell it was Japanese. This wasn't just someone's messy scrawl—it was chicken scratch.

Still, if she could basically get where she was supposed to go, that was enough. Following the sign, Filru turned right, and where the "school corridor" came to a dead end, there was a big sliding door open, eight feet high and twice that wide. Calling with a quiet "pardon me," she went inside. There, finally, was a school gymnasium.

It had wood floors. Mats were piled up on a mountain in the corner. A sort of second floor that you climbed up to via ladder circled the whole area, and from the open windows there, sunlight was coming in.

And there was not a single person there. Filru looked around the area, then looked around one more time. There was nobody.

At another look, the place was a size or two bigger than a middle school or high school gymnasium. It was indeed old, but it was well-made and sturdy. Typically, strengthening magic was cast on this sort of facility so it wouldn't break, even when they did freestyle matches.

Filru approached the mountain of mats piled up to nearly the ceiling, clapping a hand on it. Every single one of the tatami would have been reinforced, of course. It was essential that they be durable enough to withstand magical girls on top of them running, falling, breaking falls, and crawling. So they would have been quite

expensive.

This department seemed like it would have more funds than the prison. Though the two departments were related, practically like siblings, one doing the catching and the other locking up those who were caught, they were different in this respect, after all.

While Filru was having stingy thoughts about money—

"Ohhh, there you are."

—someone called out to her. Filru turned around went, "Ohhh," unintentionally reacting the same way as the other person.

It was a magical girl with a police-officer motif, with flashing lights at her waist and big handcuffs hanging from her shoulders. She looked like a cop—in other words, she was using her entire person to emphasize that she was a member of the Inspection Department. Smiling brightly, waving her hand in front of her face, she said to Filru cheerily, "I was really floundering there," sounding composed, in all actuality.

"Hey there! I'm Patricia." In contrast with her cop image, her tone was friendly.

"Ahhh, hello. My name is Filru."

"Man, ha-ha-ha, there was nobody here, so I was wondering what was up."

"Pardon me—I'm rather at a loss myself here, too. I was wondering why there aren't any people here."

"Yeah, that'll make you feel that way, huh?"

"That's why, like I said, I don't know what to do. I came late, and then for some reason, it was empty, and nobody's here."

"For real? Same here. I showed up just a little late for this arrest techniques seminar, and then for some reason, the place was empty."

They both looked at each other. Filru sort of got the idea that their conversation was not on the same page.

The police-style magical girl Patricia gave Filru a baffled look. "…You're not with the Inspection Department, Miss Fil?"

"No, I'm here to take the seminar. Wait… You're not from the Inspection Department, either?"

"Nah, I'm taking it, too."

Filru bottled up what she wanted to say—*Isn't it fraud for you not to be in the Inspection Department, in that getup?* This meant that it was just one lost person running into another lost person, and she hadn't resolved anything. "What should we do? I'm not sure if we

should be walking around everywhere, but maybe we should go look and see if there's anyone else here. I think it's clearly odd for the department to be *this* empty."

Patricia folded her arms and looked down for a while, then suddenly lifted her face and called over Filru's shoulder in a loud voice that carried well, "Hey! You over there!"

Filru turned around. Over where she'd called was nothing but stacked-up mats.

"You over there, right there. The one hiding behind the mats."

There was a two-second pause, and then a figure popped out from behind the piled mats, giving Filru quite the shock. When she'd entered the dojo, she'd gotten close enough to that pile of mats that she'd reached out to touch it, but she hadn't noticed the girl at all.

The one who appeared from the shadow of the mats was a magical girl. The guitar over her back was rough, aggressive, and reminiscent of a battle-ax. She was decked out in so much metal that she jangled whenever she walked—earrings, chains, studs, skulls, a collar, the works. While her costume itself was simple with just a long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans, it had a decent visual impact.

The guitar magical girl put her right hand behind her head and smiled a little awkwardly. "I wasn't really hiding. That makes it seem like I'm a bad guy who sneaked into the Inspection Department, huh? But Tot's a pure and righteous magical girl and not at all thinking bad things."

Filru didn't really get it. But this person might be their savior, arriving just when she and this other latecomer were looking at each other going, *"Oh, what do we do, what do we do?"* Filru restrained her surprise and asked, "You're from the Inspection Department, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, totes," said Patricia. "It's super obvious she's with the department."

Was it, though? If Patricia said so, then Filru figured she had to be right. But if anything, the magical girl before them with a guitar on her back was dressed in an antiauthoritarian sort of getup. Once, Filru had seen a detective drama with a story where like, the detective who dealt with organized crime looked more like a yakuza than the real thing, so maybe it was basically something along those lines.

“If you’re from the Inspection Department, then you know what’s going on right now, yes?” asked Filru.

“Yeah, that!” agreed Patricia. “That’s what I wanna know! When I showed up late, for some reason, nobody was around.”

The girl with the guitar brought her hand out from the back to her head to smack herself on the forehead twice. Expelling meaningless sounds like “Uhhh” and “Urghh,” she slowly spun around on her left leg to turn her body to the right, and then at ten times that speed, she spun back the opposite way to face Filru again. “That’s a secret.”

“What? A secret?”

“You guys are those people, right? You came for the thing?”

“Ah, yes, the arrest technique seminar.”

“Yeah, that.”

The guitar girl stuck up the index finger of the hand that had smacked her forehead, then waved it two, three times, thrusting it before them. “You know those emergency drills in elementary school? You don’t tell the students about them beforehand, right? The bell just suddenly rings, and there’s an announcement that there’s a fire somewhere, and then the drill starts.”

“Ohhh, I get it,” said Patricia. “So you mean right now is like the part of an emergency drill where you’re taking the class like normal?”

“Yeah, yeah, you got it.”

“So then, we should act natural.”

“Uh-huh, bingo. Anyways, Tot’s got business to do.”

“Hey, hey!” Patricia grabbed the guitar girl’s shoulder as she was trying to turn around, spinning her back to face her. The guitar magical girl’s knees were trembling slightly, and she was clenching her teeth. Though she was doing everything she could to resist, she was being held there by force.

“Tot’s kinda busy, though…”

“The two of us are gonna be left all alone here again, y’know. We don’t wanna keep on waiting forever and ever. So let’s have a little chat. Just a brief chat’s fine.”

The guitar girl sat down—or rather, was made to sit down, and Patricia took a seat next. *I’d rather not get my butt dirty…*, thought Filru as she sat down in a triangle with the other two magical girls.

“I’m Patricia. I’m a freelance magical girl. My special skill is punching people.”

“Oh, my name is Filru. I work in a magical-girl prison.”

“Tot is, um…called Keek. I work at the Inspection Department.”

“Keek? You’re not Tot?” Patricia asked.

“Ummm, um… My name’s Tot Keek.”

They made some small talk such as “I wonder what kind of training this is?” or “It’s cold today, huh?” But that was all it took before Tot Keek and Patricia were laughing with their arms around each other’s shoulders.

“Man, Tot, you’re a real blast!”

“I get that a lot!”

Filru didn’t get just what was so funny; she felt left out. While Filru was unable to do anything but offer fake smiles and show she was listening, the two of them had gotten close, so friendly that it was like they’d already forgotten that tense exchange from when they’d first sat down.

Were communication skills necessary in the Inspection Department? Maybe their members sometimes had missions where they had to get a suspect to confess, or maybe they’d do some spy work and infiltrate other organizations. It seemed highly plausible that they had someone on the team with a nickname like “So-and-so the Closer.”

“So then why’d you decide to take the seminar, Filly?” Tot Keek asked.

“Huh?”

Anyone will get flustered if the discussion gets turned toward them at a time when their mind is wandering elsewhere. And when people are flustered, things they probably shouldn’t say will thoughtlessly pop out of their mouths.

“Taking the seminar will bump up my base pay a little.” *I’ve gone and said something I shouldn’t have*, she thought after it came out of her mouth, but it was too late.

Tot Keek clapped her hands and said with a laugh, “Money’s important, after all!”

Patricia closed her eyes and nodded. “Seriously, no joke. Money is important.”

“Tot’s rich, so Tot doesn’t have to worry about it.”

“Really? Is your salary good?”

“Salary? Nah, Tot got money from a friend. Tot’s friend got

super rich, so she shared a little bit with Tot, too."

"Wow! That's great! So how much did you get?"

"A million."

A million! So there were people out there who would slap down a million just because you were a friend. A remark like *"You've got it nice,"* or *"I envy you,"* or *"Introduce that friend to me"* almost slipped out, but she hurriedly swallowed it.

"You've got it nice!" Lacking any of Filru's prudence or restraint, Patricia just blurted it out.

"How much do you make, Patty?"

"My last job was about two hundred thousand. But a million? Never ever."

Two hundred thousand—now that Filru could beat. She felt herself welling up with a slight sense of superiority.

"Two hundred thousand pounds from one job? That's amazing."

"Not pounds. I can't get that much. It's dollars, dollars."

Filru coughed hard. She reached around and patted her back a few times and looked up to see Tot Keek and Patricia eyeing her with concern.

"You okay? Are you sick? But magical girls don't get sick, right?" asked Tot Keek.

"Ah, no, I'm quite fine."

But Filru wasn't actually okay. She'd been shaken to her core. She didn't know how many yen was in a pound, but judging from the way Patricia talked, a pound was higher than a dollar. In other words, a million pounds was higher than a million dollars, and to convert it to Japanese yen—no, in the first place, Patricia's compensation of two hundred thousand dollars was…

Filru clenched her teeth. If this conversation went on and the subject turned to her own pay, she was really going to feel terrible.

Filru put particular effort into a smile and turned to Tot Keek and Patricia. "I just choked a little. If there were problems with my health, I wouldn't be coming to an arrest technique seminar in the first place."

"True."

"They're constantly bringing brutal criminals into the prison, after all. You have to be a particularly strong and merciless magical girl, or you'd never be able to handle the job." Truthfully, the prison wasn't constantly booking brutal criminals, but Filru made it sound like it was. Telling a white lie would make it easier for her to

change the topic.

"It's gotta be all real strong people working at the prison, huh?" said Tot Keek. "Seems like it'd be really hard to attack."

"They say they've got people imprisoned there who've, like, killed tens of thousands of people," said Patricia.

As expected, that had easily shifted the conversation. Privately relieved, Filru continued. "You always have to be working to get stronger. That's why I got the idea of taking this seminar, to learn new techniques."

She ignored how she'd literally just said it was because it would increase her pay. Neither Patricia nor Tot Keek touched on that, nodding and going, "Ohhh," and "You're real ambitious!"

At this point, Filru judged that she should keep this going so as to leave far behind the nasty and raw subject of money. "I hear the Inspection Department has a technique they keep secret."

"Oooh, sounds exciting," said Tot Keek.

"Huh? But you're in the Inspection Department, right, Tot?" said Patricia. "Wouldn't you know any secret department techniques?"

"Naw, not at all. Those guys are kind of in a different section from Tot, see. That's not something everyone in the department knows. Tot's like, you know, a desk jockey."

"Oh, you're in the office, huh? You don't see those much."

"Never mind about Tot. More importantly, what kind of techniques are we talkin' about?"

"I hear Inspection has a move where you can control your opponent perfectly just by grabbing their ear," said Patricia.

"Whoaaa! An ear grab! Awesome!"

"C'mon, Tot, they don't pass down secrets like that in the office?"

"I was taught that if you grab the ear, you immediately rip it off."

Filru barely stopped herself from blurting out, *"What are you, a mobster?"* She'd been doing a lot of holding her tongue that day.

"Even if it doesn't do much actual damage or cause much bleeding, you're making them lose a body part, and shoving that in their face gets to them mentally…is what Tot's master said."

Dirty. Why was it that office workers' techniques were even crueler? Hiding how she was flinching on the inside, Filru let it go with the thought, *Well, some people think that way*.

“They’ve got some interesting techniques in Inspection,” said Patricia. “When I grab a person’s ear, I also dig into their eye with my thumb.”

What kind of world of carnage was this?

Filru focused on calming her racing pulse. Tot Keek was a member of the Inspection Department. She was kind of like a hunter who caught armed and sentient wild animals. Compared to that, Filru’s work was like that of a zookeeper. Though there were risks, she wasn’t exactly putting her life on the line day in and day out.

And Patricia in particular was a freelancer. That was certainly a world where a moment’s carelessness would mean your life. If necessary, she would pull moves like crushing an eyeball with her thumb. So it wasn’t strange or anything.

Even though she understood this logically, Filru’s spirit was withering. She was afraid of the two magical girls before her. How to best get through this situation without her own smallness being noticed—?

“Ohhh, you’re still here?”

By the time Filru jumped and turned toward the voice, Patricia and Tot Keek were both already on guard. Filru also scrambled up, about to go into a fighting stance, but since the owner of the voice was a middle-aged man in a well-tailored suit with a cleanly trimmed mustache—if he were a little thinner, he’d be in dandy range—she didn’t, standing to bow instead. Was he a guest? Or an employee of the Inspection Department?

The middle-aged man leaned just half his body into the dojo entrance, not flinching at all in the face of the magical girls’ battle readiness. He actually looked somehow relieved as he said, “What a relief. It’s been one thing after another the whole day.”

“Um, uhhh, what’s this about?”

“Apparently, some magical girls have barricaded themselves in the villa of an official from the Central Authority. He was raging on, telling us to arrest them immediately. But that’s not going to happen when we’re so damn busy right now.”

“Um, so then—,” Filru began.

“Gate number ten’s already set up. I’m leaving this in your hands now.” The man retreated from the door without another word. The sound of leather shoes tapping down the hallway got gradually quieter, then quickly vanished.

Should I follow him? I guess I should, Filru thought. Right as she came to that conclusion and was about to run off, Patricia clapped her hands.

"I get it—so that means the seminar starts now, huh? That's how it is?"

With the question turned to her, Tot looked left, then right, as if she was confused, then glanced back at Patricia. And then, seeming rather unconfident for some reason, she gave a little nod.

Filru was finally convinced, too. "Is that what's going on? So in other words, the emergency drill…or rather, the arrest technique seminar is starting?"

"Pretty fanatical of 'em, to be this committed to formatting it like actual combat," said Patricia. "Who would've thought the Inspection Department was this flashy?"

"Yep, the department sure loves theatrics. Anyway, Tot's gonna get going—"

"So then you're in charge of us, Tot Keek?" asked Filru.

"Huh? Wha—? Um…well, maybe."

"Gate number ten, was it?" Patricia confirmed. "Okay, then let's get going. We were already late to begin with, besides."

Patricia got Tot Keek to stand up, then pushed her into the lead, and the three of them left the dojo. Filru felt slightly hopeful. Maybe her income was lower than theirs, and her job was less dangerous. But she wasn't going to let them beat her in the realm of physical skills or combat techniques, which she'd honed in her free time out of boredom. All the pride of the prison staff lay on Filru's shoulders.

The setting for this seminar scene was England. The employing mage had found fault with the petty errors of the magical girls he'd hired and had scrimped on their wages, and so they'd all abandoned the job together and occupied his estate. When these sorts of incidents occurred, it was time for the Inspection Department to step in.

Given the situation, Filru would rather have joined in with the criminals instead. She had never personally experienced the hardship of wage theft herself, but countless times she had wished

she could be paid a little more, and having just heard money talk from people who were particularly blessed, Filru was feeling more on edge than ever.

But this was ultimately a seminar. She wouldn't get anywhere sympathizing with a scenario made up for the sake of training.

The "mage's estate," which was the scene, was on a plot of land that was eighty yards squared and surrounded by a tall stone wall, with multiple arches twined in rose vines covering a stone walk path. It was a fine mansion, like a more expensive version of an old-timey English residence, and the spectacle of it stirred Filru's irritable heart.

The victim—the mage—was angry and red-faced. "Those ruffians! How dare they stoop to this lowness over such trivial work?!" he yelled as he whacked the wall with his cane. His acting was so realistic, Filru was surprised that the Inspection Department had people talented in such a variety of fields. But the pointed hat and long cape really were rather tasteless for a mage costume, so she subtracted points on that production aspect only.

"Ummm, they've said they put up a magic barrier, so we don't have to worry about being seen from the outside," said Tot Keek.

"About five magical girls who are good in a fight, and aside from those, just over ten… I see, I see." Patricia nodded.

All the information they received in advance pointed to it being a hassle, but this was for training, so that was to be expected. The three of them had had a little meeting. Filru wrapped the thread tied to Tot Keek's belt to her own pinky, while the thread tied to Patricia's belt went to her thumb. They left behind the staff member still hamming it up as the angry mage and stormed the mansion.

With a roar loud enough to rattle their eardrums, Patricia kicked down the door, barricade and all. From behind, they could hear a shrieking voice telling them not to damage the house, but it was doubtful whether Patricia herself even heard that. Not bothered at all about what she broke or smashed, she jumped over the rattan chair that was thrown at her from inside and destroyed it with a spinning hook kick, using the rotation to back up from the entranceway to the outside, and Filru switched places with her and headed inside.

When she rushed down the stairs, an enemy was running up to her. Filru grabbed the edge of the carpet and yanked with all her strength. The enemy toppled to the ground, and Filru grabbed her

once she was down. Filru held her arm, she caught Filru's leg, and as they were tangled up, Filru was gradually passing her threads through the enemy's body.

Filru's motif was that of a seamstress, and the magic thread she used would ignore all resistance of a target to sew anything to them. When she sewed something, it would cause no harm. She just had to pull the thread out and the object would go back to how it was. There was no need to rip off ears or gouge eyes.

Drawing tight the thread she'd sewn to her opponent, she twisted her joints and forced her muscles, pressing her spine down over her knees. Putting the enemy in a lock shaped like an arrow and tying her up, she tossed her at another enemy, who was coming down the stairs, and when she caught her ally, Filru went to grab her, too, and sewing both of them up quickly, she kicked them away.

Patricia was on the outside, Filru in the front, and Tot Keek in the back.

There was a reason Filru had taken the role of "charge through the front," which would probably be the fiercest battle. She would show them here that she was good and strong, and she would maintain face for all the prison workers. She didn't get low pay because she was weak or because she was useless. She had simply been designated as cheap labor, and yet she was actually quite competent. She would show them. She wasn't going to lose to a million pounds or two hundred thousand dollars.

With the sort of invigorated expression she'd never shown once when on duty, Filru briskly checked inside the rooms. When she stepped in from the doorway, the first thing was a great hall. She'd made sure to memorize the floor plan.

As she moved forward, she sewed thread to the floor every three steps. She entered a hallway, going straight ahead to a T-intersection, and passed by a decorative suit of armor. There, she squatted down and yanked on one of her threads. That pulled the helmet part of the armor sewn to the end of a thread and sent it flying through the air to *clang* into the head of the magical girl who'd jumped out from the T-intersection, about to hit Filru from behind.

Grappling with the staggering magical girl, Filru sewed both her arms, and once she was immobile, Filru picked her up and started throwing her down, but right before she slammed her head

into the floor with nothing at all to break the impact, she remembered, *Oh, right—this is a training seminar*, and threw her on her back instead. That had been close. She carefully sewed up the magical girl, who was curled up and moaning, and rolled her down to a corner of the hallway.

Her threads sent vibrations to her. It was impossible to get Filru from behind in this house. Vibrations were coming along the line she'd sewn to Tot Keek. She had to be fighting, too.

Going down the hall to meet up with her, Filru wrapped her thread around a chest in a room on the way and yanked. The thread squeezed around the chest, crushing it, and from inside she could hear a muffled scream. Thinking to herself, *It's no use trying to catch me from inside there*, she tossed the whole chest outside.

A striking sound rang out from behind the door ahead. Filru dashed forward, maintaining momentum to kick open the door and leap into the room. There, a magical girl in a fluttering costume dodged Tot Keek's guitar swing while also evading Filru's flying kick from behind. Tot Keek back-stepped away and strummed her guitar.

They had all told one another beforehand about their magic. With a sideways jump, Filru avoided the flying music notes, and the fluttering magical girl slipped and slid through the gaps between the music notes in flowing motions. The dodged music notes struck, broke, and bounced off everywhere on the floor, ceiling, and bed, but with another flutter here and flutter there, she avoided the reflected notes, too.

"She just avoids anything and everything!" Tot Keek said.

Filru withdrew behind Tot Keek, touching her back lightly from behind. "Can you coordinate your attacks with mine?"

"But she can dodge it."

"Please, one more time."

"Okay, I'll give it a try."

She shot music notes from her guitar once more, and they jumped around, crowding the small room, but the enemy still fluttered away from them all—but now, Filru took action. She tossed threads woven into a net shape at their opponent. Taking the net woven of her threads, she spread it wide to wrap up the enemy. An invisible net spread over such a large area couldn't be avoided, no matter how you struggled.

Filru set her heel on the net and yanked, and when the

fluttering magical girl staggered, a music note hit her. It struck her hard in the side, and she bent forward in a V shape, and then even more music notes flooded toward her. Studded with music notes, the enemy fell.

"…Perhaps we overdid it?" said Filru.

"It's fine, no worries. At the Inspection Department, our training is basically like real combat."

If Tot Keek from the Inspection Department said so, then it had to be all right. Filru sewed up the fluttery magical girl, then tossed her out the window.

Feeling the vibrations of many heavy footsteps in the hallway, Filru instructed Tot Keek with a hand sign. The same moment the magical girls leaped into the room, Tot Keek strummed her guitar, beating them down with a rush of music notes and slamming three of the magical girls back into the hallway. Filru punched the one magical girl who slipped through the music notes while simultaneously sewing the top of her collar and passing the thread through a beam in the ceiling. Then she dropped all her body weight on the line with full force, yanking the girl up to the ceiling to strike her head, knocking her out.

Filru stepped out into the hallway, punching, kicking, throwing, sewing up one enemy, then two, then three. She went straight on to race over the railing up to the second floor, kicking up to hit the jaw of the first magical girl she saw there.

"Capitalist dogs!" yelled a magical girl as she sliced down with a long sword from the upper position, which Filru dodged, turned aside, and tangled in her string. She spun the two of them around so that the incoming music notes knocked them to the ground. Even though it was just acting, Filru didn't like being called a capitalist dog by someone from the Inspection Department.

The next room was packed with about ten black human-shaped somethings. Filru pretended to be overwhelmed by their numbers, backing up one room, and when the group of black human shapes entered, she pulled a thread. The threads she'd strung up inside the room like a magic barrier all came together, gathering the human-shaped foes in the middle. There, Tot Keek showered the foes with music notes, sending them flying. Just then, the magical girl who seemed to be controlling these beings appeared. She swung at Filru in a furious rage—but Filru parried with a thread strung up vertically. She slid down on the ground past the enemy, hooking a

circle of thread around the enemy's foot to hang her upside down and tie her up near the ceiling. *Now for the next room*, she thought, kicking it open—and saw the bedroom window was broken, the three magical girls on the ground, and Patricia, waiting behind them, was shrugging.

"It was boring doing nothing but wait for you guys. So I just ran up the back wall."

"You can't do that," Filru replied. "We discussed our roles in this."

"Don't try and claim all the glory for yourself, Filly."

"I'm not claiming it for myself! It was a joint effort—right, Tot?" Filru called out, turning around.

But Tot Keek wasn't there.

"Huh?"

She looked at the thread on her pinky. It had come off without her realizing.

"Was she off fighting somewhere else?" asked Patricia.

"No, we met up inside just before… How strange."

◇◇◇

"This is a massive, unprecedented scandal," Mana spat bitterly, practically smacking her teacup down on the table. There was so little tea left in it that you could see right to the bottom.

As if filling the pause, Hana picked up the teapot and poured her another cup.

The waiting room they were using as an office-slash-break room was empty except for Mana and Hana, but the both of them still lowered their voices. This wasn't something they could discuss loudly.

The waiting room was small, surrounded on three of its four sides with magic cabinets. Lined up inside the cabinets were documents relating to past resolved investigations. Was there really among all those documents any scandal as great as this one? They both sighed.

"This is all because they made that old man who can't even remember the inspectors' faces an operator…," grumbled Mana.

"There was a whole string of incidents that day, so things were incredibly busy."

“Regardless…it’s no good for the seminar attendees to be carrying out an arrest, is it?” Mana gulped down another cup of tea.

Hana immediately poured her another. “So they somehow managed to hide the situation from the guests?”

“Apparently, they made the arrest itself the seminar.”

Hana moistened her throat with precisely half her tea, then gently laid her cup on the tea table. “But you know, it seems something strange happened. Did you hear about it, Mana?”

“Something strange? That’s news to me.”

“Apparently, they had three attendees perform the arrest, but once it was over, there were only two left.”

“What is this, some sort of ghost story?”

“The one who disappeared wasn’t listed among the staff or the seminar attendees. They described her appearance as unique, but there was nobody who met that description.”

“Sis, don’t freak me out like that. You’ve got a creepy look on your face. If you’re gonna tell ghost stories, scare me with something else.”

“Some say that an elf lives in the Inspection Department, and she couldn’t bear to see them in trouble, so she came to save them.”

“This isn’t the elves and the shoemaker, y’know.”

General Pukin's Case File: The Murder of the Mage

This story is set so long ago that it has nothing to do with *Magical Girl Raising Project*.

General Pukin's Case File: The Murder of the Mage

Beyond the morning dew, the sun was rising. A soft, glowing orange illuminated the lightning spire that stood over the government office. Night would soon turn to day. The city of London was foggy in the morning and foggy at nighttime. Get sick of the dampness, the only places to run were home or the pub.

When I turned at the crossroads, I passed by a lamplighter carrying a ladder. He was eyeing me suspiciously. My gentleman's attire must have only seemed more dubious to him.

I wouldn't have been walking around the back alleys at dawn, if not for work.

Three roads down from the main avenue and around to the back was a little theater known for its year-round amateur operas. I circled the building clockwise from the main entrance three times, then turned around to circle it counterclockwise once more and did a fifth lap clockwise before going to the back alley—as long as no one was watching me, the path would open.

The cobblestone street, the dim sky, and the theater all began to twist about as if melting, and after counting for three seconds, I was standing somewhere completely different. The sights were different—the smells, too. The temperature here seemed colder. No matter how many times I experienced it, I never got used to it. It felt nasty, like the queasy feeling of my insides jostling around from playing on the swing set as a child.

The mildewy, run-down theater was now gone, and in its place, there was a mansion. The property was surrounded by a tall rock wall, each side of which was a little less than 250 feet. The gates, which looked like fine metalwork, opened toward me. They were thick and looked sturdy.

I raised my hand to say "Cheers" to my younger colleague who was keeping watch by the gates. He was absentmindedly reading a

newspaper but looked up when I called out to him. He seemed quite sleepy.

"Oh, they've even sent you? We'll be glad to have you here."

"They must want to make a show of their efforts by increasing personnel. How's progress?"

"They say the next president in America will be Lincoln. Seems like a rather bothersome fellow, if you ask me."

"I wasn't asking about the progress of the American elections. I'm asking about your progress on the case."

"There's none, of course. The master here is in such a temper, ordering us to do something about things right this minute."

The wealthy and aristocrats always assumed everything would operate conveniently for them. And when they didn't, their ire would turn to those beneath them. As watchmen of the law, we were charged with very unique cases, those that involved direct contact with mages, mysterious beings who keep hidden from the world, so you might well call us chosen government officials. However, to mages, we were nothing more than inferiors.

"Well, I reckon it'll be resolved soon," I said.

"Oh-ho, so you mean to crack the case? Splendid."

"Not me—the chief has called in a specialist."

Neither of us would say anything disagreeable, like *"They think so little of us. They've turned their backs on us. This was supposed to be under our jurisdiction."* We were in fact struggling enough that I wanted to abandon this case.

"Ohhh. A specialist? So there are such folk?"

"That there are. It seems it's someone they rather don't want a relationship with, though."

Casually raising a hand, the same as when I'd come, I walked past the man. *Which reminds me, I loaned him eight shillings in a bridge game*, I recalled, but I could wait until after payday to tell him to give it back.

The flagstone path was covered with a row of arches that was twined with rose vines. I'm sure they were originally planted for nobler guests, but unfortunately, the guest today was me, no more than a humble minor official. Coming off the walkway, I went over a step to stand before the great door.

When visiting a mage's residence, there was no need to call out or use the knocker. Royal courts and governments had maintained friendly relations with mages for generations, so there were

established rules when it came to that sort of manners and comportment, and if you were someone who was aware of the existence of mages, you could get an audience.

"It's Fatur, from the Intelligence Branch," I called out with some reservation.

The large, black-painted door opened heavily.

Holding my hat under my arm, I stepped into the estate. The moment my toe touched the carpet inside, I felt as though a hand—no, something thinner, like tentacles—reached out to me through the soles of my shoes and into my body. It gave me the chills. Not being a mage, I felt quite awful. So then would a mage be all right? I couldn't understand what went on in the head of a man who would live in such a sinister house.

Coming to greet me from inside was an old man who looked to be in his late sixties. Though any human in a mage's estate would not necessarily be the age he appeared.

"Oh, hello," I said.

"I am Allgrave, the butler of this here residence."

Exchanging basic greetings, I reexamined the butler. Something like a stick protruded slightly from the bottom of his jacket. He probably had a short staff stuck in his belt. So then this man was also a mage? He was humble, considering that.

His back was not bent, and he was of sturdy build. He seemed healthy in general. His expression was one of worry, but he gave the sense that usually he wore charming smiles. It was what you'd call a butler face. His head was smoothly balding up from his forehead to the top of his head, and he was slightly shorter than average—my gaze was on a level with the top of his head. Perhaps he was a believer in the beard and that a long beard is the proof of a mage, as his was long enough to reach his belly button. For no particular reason, I gave the beard on my own chin a little stroke with a fingertip to smooth it down.

"I'll show you in." Going ahead of me, Allgrave started walking, and I followed after him.

The butler's pace was leisurely. But considering his age, build, and his profession, he should be walking a little faster. He had to be consciously trying to calm down.

Deeper within the mansion, in front of a set of double doors, Allgrave stopped. He lowered his voice and whispered toward the room, but the voice that responded was as intense as an animal in

heat. Apologetically, Allgrave prompted me to go ahead, and I entered the room.

"You're late!"

I received no sort of greeting.

"My deepest apologies, sir. In delicate matters such as this, we narrow down the number of people involved, so the investigation has been—"

"I have no need of blathering or excuses!"

It was the master of the estate, Barnheim Hoggleton.

The end of the staff in his hand was fixed with a crystal skull with large rubies inserted in the eye sockets. His hooded robe was very much in the orthodox magician style, well-fitted and glossy like velvet—all very exquisite accoutrements. By contrast, as for the man himself—he did not comport himself like a fine mage. The way his face was buried in his hood, combined with the only slight growth of his mustache, was reminiscent of an opossum. Though he puffed out his chest in a domineering manner, he was a head shorter than Allgrave. He was lacking in stature and had a sort of pinched expression on his face. There was an all-black human-shaped "something" that stood beside him like a shadow.

Since I'd looked over the report before coming, I had a general idea of his character. However, now that I was actually speaking to the man, I understood that whoever had written that report had shown the utmost restraint in their description.

Hoggleton was, basically, a swindler. Thanks to his distinguished family, he had all the connections the generations of his ancestors had cultivated, and he made use of them to introduce villains to villains, making poor folk in trouble his prey in order to fatten his own coffers. Blackmail, extortion, loan-sharking, fence work, human trafficking—even simple rumors of those acts that never reached the public eye would be too many to count on both hands and feet, but even so, he was never caught. With connections to families in high places, the generous hush money he gave to government officials, and clever maneuvering, Hoggleton always kept himself safe.

And in the role of the most direct form of protection, there was also the black shadow that stood by his side. It was a service daemon he had paid someone playing at Doctor Frankenstein a hefty sum to cobble together for him. It was a repulsive black all over, with slippery-smooth skin, and long, sharp claws that could

have no other purpose than violence. It was too imposing to call a familiar. Even if someone were to stand up to attack this man out of righteous anger or personal grudge, just one glance at this beast would most certainly send them spinning right around again to leave.

"Why must I be forced to suffer on and on in this misery? I can't swallow my meals for shuddering at the thought of the murderer who could be anywhere! I can't sleep at night!"

Seeing Hoggleton's fury as he carped on and on about one thing after another—at every little act of laziness from our office, how much he was paying in taxes, and why he wasn't getting the recompense that befitted those taxes—turned my heart to ice. This was really going to kill my inclination to the case.

After that, I listened to his opining for a full fifteen minutes, until finally, he guided me to the scene of the crime. The room, which was normally used for meals, was spacious; a long oak table sat in the center, and each wall was decorated with a big painting. I don't particularly consider myself a man of the arts, but I doubt they were anything made by famous painters. In fact, they were rather like the scrawls of a child. Ignoring the master's bragging on and on about how "I received that from one of the Three Sages, the great Puk," I went into the room. Even after two days, the scent of blood still remained. It smelled of burnt things, too.

The state of the crime scene had been documented in the report.

The victim was Missus Hoggleton, the wife of the master of this estate, Mister Hoggleton.

Two days earlier—the day of the incident—a guest had come to the Hoggleton estate. It wasn't a particularly unusual guest. He was just an old friend, and he'd informed his host of his coming beforehand. Mister Hoggleton had welcomed the guest, and then after about twenty minutes of chat, when the subject turned to his wife, he had realized she wasn't there. He'd had the servants search the house, wondering what was going on, and upon finding this room was locked from the inside and that there was no response at all, even when they called through the door, he had been forced to order a servant to break down the door, whereupon they were faced with the sight of the lady, dead and cold.

The body had been underneath the table. I squatted down and peered underneath. A part of the rug had soaked up the blood and

stained the orange-and-white pattern a dark crimson. The body had already been taken away.

The murder weapon was a knife; the victim had been stabbed in the chest. It was a butcher's knife normally used in the kitchen. The length of the blade three inches. Anyone from the mansion could have picked it up.

The lock on the door in this room was simply the kind where a little knob was twisted from within. It wasn't made with a keyhole to open with a key from the outside. There were no windows and no fireplace. The locksmith who had been brought over had guaranteed that if the knob or the door were removed, it would leave signs, no matter how it was done. The possibility that the lady had locked the door herself to commit suicide had also been discarded. She'd been stabbed in the chest with the knife multiple times, with multiple wounds that could be fatal. No matter how energetic she was in her suicide, she would die before she could stab herself that many times.

The top of the table had been piled with ash. From the slight burned scraps that remained, they had learned it was from promissory notes for debts, and when Mister Hoggleton had checked the safe, he'd found most of the promissory notes to be gone. Dozens of papers had all been burned to ash, leaving only little scraps, and upon opening the door, it had blown everywhere, scattering all over the room. They said it had not only gotten on the table, but on the carpet, chairs, people, walls, and the door, dirtying as far as the ceiling and inciting Hoggleton's rage.

Whenever there was a mysterious crime in a place that involved mages, one would first suspect magic. Unlocking spells, locking spells, cursing the knife, instantly transporting the body, walking through walls, or any various other methods—with magic, one could create a situation that would normally be impossible.

But it was not magic. That was the problem.

The whole of Hoggleton's estate was protected by a powerful magic barrier. Magic could not be used inside the house. That was the repulsive sensation I'd felt earlier, like my innards were being sloshed around. Normally, a mage's mansion would not have such a barrier. Of course. To a mage, not using magic, doing odd jobs and everything else by hand, was an embarrassment. But Hoggleton prioritized his sense of safety over his pride as a mage or his convenience. Since he made a living doing dirty work, he would

have a lot of mage enemies, and he ranked the safety of being able to protect himself from magic higher in priority than inconvenience or eeriness.

Not only mages but also familiars, golems, all types of magic items, and even the service daemon Hoggleton used could not make use of any special magic in this house. The daemon could only use its innate physical strength to tear things apart with its claws, but that was enough, as long as it was merely his bodyguard.

A house where magic couldn't be used. A service daemon that could cut humans apart like paper. Hoggleton had secured his own safety, but unfortunately, he had failed to be attentive to his wife as well.

A terrible fate for his wife, but you could also say she had brought this on herself. If Hoggleton was a swindler, then his wife was a swindler as well. Even before their marriage, they said she'd taken part in a number of his ploys and had even made use of her feminine wiles to help him ensnare his marks.

Since it was uncertain if Missus Hoggleton had been killed over her involvement in her husband's affairs, the first suspects were anyone who might harbor any lingering resentments toward her. Furthermore, from the fact that the culprit had burned up the promissory notes, those who had borrowed money from Mister Hoggleton were also under suspicion, so a number of inspectors had been dispatched to those people. Missus Hoggleton normally was in charge of the key to the safe, and on the day of the incident, it had been lying in front of the open safe. Kill her, and one would have been able to get the key—in other words, that meant anyone would have been able to open the safe. Though we got Mister Hoggleton to tell us who he was lending money to, he clearly had more debtors than there was ash there, so evidently, he was engaged in the lending of intentionally hidden funds. Was he lending to aristocrats, or was there something more sinister going on? Whatever the case, because of uncooperative aristocrats, the investigation was struggling here, too.

But still, the investigation team's greatest suspicions were of the people within the estate. There were multiple reasons for this: the fact that the culprit had brought the knife out from the kitchen without drawing suspicion, burned up the promissory notes using the knowledge that the missus held the key to the safe, and murdered the wife inside the mansion. It was rather unlikely for an

outside debtor to do all of these things. A debtor more closely affiliated with Hoggleton would have both a motive and knowledge of the affairs within the household. And since this was Hoggleton, it wouldn't have been at all strange for him to be tying down his own servants with debts.

While attempting to soothe Hoggleton, I looked around the room. There was nothing more than what had been in the report.

When I went to investigate the outside of the room next, Hoggleton followed me, dogging me with repetitive fretting all the while. He must not have wanted to leave me alone in his house.

"I say, having you lot loitering about when you're not even going to be useful, I can't relax."

"My apologies, good sir. I beg your patience for a while."

He was being quite aggressive, but this was also the flip side of cowardice. His fear that he could be next won over the sadness of his wife's death or the anger of his promissory notes having been burned up. It didn't appear to be an act.

I had already heard that Hoggleton was uncooperative. Until I had met him, I'd had some suspicions, but after seeing him—there are things one understands, upon meeting a man. This man was nothing like the culprit. There was no deception here, and he was sincerely frightened. His uncooperative attitude was ultimately because he would be in trouble if his own wrongdoing were to get out.

What a bother. Could I blame the boss for relying on a contracted specialist?

I strolled about the house, examined the property, then returned to the scene of the crime. It was all as the report had stated, down to the letter. Hoggleton was continuing to gripe and moan.

While dodging Hoggleton, I took out my pocket watch on its chain to check the time. It was almost noon. Being inside a mage's house really does throw your sense of time in disarray. If Hoggleton wouldn't arrange for lunch, then I had to get something for myself.

With my mind on the upcoming meal, I was slow to notice.

There was a girl on the other side of the cracked-open door staring at me. Her gaze overwhelmed me; my mouth hung half-open, and I was unable to ask who she was or question her—I just looked back at her. She was wearing a patch-covered dress like a beggar, but for some reason, it was rather fetching on her. Despite

her shabby clothing, she was a beautiful girl. Her beauty seemed artificial, not like something that could be natural-born. Her skin was a sickly white, and her dull gray eyes had an inner glow to them. The fringe hanging over her forehead was a dull gray, like her eyes.

The girl looked at me silently, and I silently looked back at the girl. We continued to stare at each other wordlessly for some time until eventually, I heard footsteps coming from behind. Then Hoggleton spoke up.

"I'll show you in. I can't have you simply strolling on in ahead."

And now, finally, Hoggleton noticed her as well. His eyes turned to the girl, and with an expression of shock, he cried, "Who let you in here?" His ability to question her at all was impressive.

"We have allowed her presence."

A shadow loomed below the door, which immediately opened. Allgrave appeared together with the owner of that voice. The patchwork girl went to embrace the newcomer gladly, and Hoggleton really couldn't criticize her now, opening and closing his mouth two, three times before he expelled a long breath. But still, he glared at the newcomer, asking hoarsely, "Who are you?"

"My name is Pukin. This is my attendant, Sonia Bean."

A waterfowl feather was stuck in her bright-colored hair. Leather gloves, leather boots, pure white tights, a satin weave cape. From her waist hung the sort of ceremonial rapier you would only ever see in a Three Musketeers stage play, and she wore a large, old-fashioned ruff collar that strangely suited her. Clothing from an earlier era was a common odd habit of mages, but this was no mage. Was she one of the magical girls I'd heard rumors about?

Hoggleton clicked his tongue. Many mages had a distaste for magical girls. I'd heard that they selected girls with potential from among the commoners and lower classes and used new technology to create beings akin to mages. It's rather nasty to despise the thing you yourself made, but perhaps it was that they didn't like having experimental animals being in the position of equals.

I didn't know enough about magical girls to have any distaste for them. My impression on seeing them for the first time that day was *fearsome*. Mages could be exceptional researchers, or foolish, wealthy gentlemen, or intolerable aristocrats—no matter what mysterious magic they used, there was something about them that was easy to understand. There was nothing like that in Pukin and Sonia. A sense of tension like that of a wild beast and the charm of a fairy were forced into a coexistence within them to create these monsters. No matter how adorable they looked, they were repulsive, but nevertheless, one couldn't take one's eyes off of them. They would make one want to watch them forever.

"We have taken on the request to resolve the incident that's occurred in this estate." Pukin was as bold and dignified as if she hadn't heard Hoggleton's tongue clicking at all.

Concealing my private unease and slight excitement, I said to Pukin, "Oh-ho, so you're the one who accepted this job? It's a pleasure to have your assistance on this case."

Unfortunately, my voice was hoarse. The inside of my mouth was bone-dry.

Pukin, the magical girl who had just introduced herself to me, boldly puffed out her chest with the fearless stance of one who knew there was nobody around who could look away from her. She was aware that she was the center of the world—but the scent of blood hung thick about her.

"We thought we might have lunch first. Has it not been prepared yet?" she asked.

"Out of the question!" Hoggleton yelled hoarsely. He had to understand that this was someone he should not oppose, but since he was in a position where he had to make himself appear strong, he'd made his bed, and now he had to sleep in it. "Isn't there something you should be doing before eating?! I can neither relax nor sleep until you find the culprit! I feel like my heart is tearing apart if I am unable to avenge my wife!"

Pukin narrowed her right eye to shoot Hoggleton a fierce expression. He began to turn around before realizing he was in no position to run away and then looked back at her. The service daemon scooted out in front of its master. I signaled to Allgrave with my eyes: *"Best not to let these two stay in the same room."*

Allgrave said something to his master, and then I passed through, cutting between Hoggleton and Pukin to say, “Right this way,” as I tossed a smile at Pukin and Sonia.

“Lunch?”

“Yes. Wait just a bit, please.”

I ran up to a maid whose eyes were still on the floor and grabbed her shoulder. The maid, who’d been watching Pukin with a dazed expression, lifted her face in surprise, then looked up at me. I moved my mouth close to her ear and whispered, “Prepare a meal —anything will do. Actually, it would be a mistake to say ‘anything.’ Make the finest meal you can as quickly as you can and hurry. Arrange a space for us to eat as well. Yes—the empty room beside the kitchen. There is best.”

I gave the maid a little push to rouse her—not *arouse*, mind you —into action while I accompanied Pukin and Sonia to the room by the kitchen. Five minutes later, pork pies beneath wafting steam arrived, and they dug into it—Sonia with her bare hands, and Pukin with a knife and fork.

The pies had been prepared in such a short time that they must have been warmed-up leftovers or some such. Well, if the pair eating them had no complaints, then all would be well.

Pukin cleanly devoured the large serving of pork pie on her plate, while to me, she gave that aforementioned look that would make anyone who saw it shudder. “This can’t be all?”

With utmost effort, I subdued the trembling that was trying to come out of my body, answering with a smile, “Yes, of course.”

I gave instructions to the maid, ordering her to just bring whatever they had, sandwiches, cutlets, or anything. Right now, I might not even turn aside a glass of tar-water.

“By the way…how should I address you?” I asked Pukin.

“Call me General, or Your Excellency, however you please. We will generally forgive mild rudeness.”

“Thank you very much, General Your Excellency.”

Though I have had interactions with mages, I’ve had none such with magical girls. I only knew of them from extremely one-sided rumors.

Surely they couldn’t all be such characters. If that were true, it would be ever so much fun. I would love that, personally, but the general public would likely not.

Pukin and Sonia just ate. They ate, ate, ate, ate, and drank so

much, I wondered where in their slim bodies they were fitting it all, and Hoggleton's estate pantry hit bottom before the pair could be satisfied. The maid reported apologetically that they were out of food, and Sonia and Pukin looked displeased, but not enough to become angry, which was a relief to me. When I checked the time on the clock, it was far beyond lunch and closer to afternoon teatime.

"So you will be solving this case, General Your Excellency?"

"Mm-hmm. We shall resolve it within the day."

Wasn't it rather unreasonable to not check the scene, eat as soon as she arrived, and then say she would resolve it within the day? I'd heard that magical girls had special power, but in this house, they wouldn't be able to use any magic to solve the case.

"How much do you know about the incident?" I asked her.

"Nothing. Tell me."

I explained in full everything that seemed necessary. But though Pukin listened, she gave only the most half-hearted replies. She certainly appeared to be listening, but she really didn't seem to have any particular thoughts about the case and was tickling Sonia with a finger under her chin. But it wasn't my job to call her to task for her attitude.

"Yes, as you know, it's quite the inexplicable situation," I said.

"Inexplicable? Really?" Pukin finally turned to me. She looked absolutely baffled.

"You disagree?"

"I'm good at torture."

Ahhh. Now this made sense to me. Being associated with the establishment and with such a strong air of blood about her, I had assumed she was a soldier, assassin, executioner, or something, but if she was a torturer, then, well, I could understand that. That would also explain her arrogant attitude. In the Magical Kingdom, generations of aristocratic rank were required to obtain the post of torturer. The torture of mages had been forbidden for quite some time, but it was still done against ordinary folk. Perhaps this magical girl had originally been a personage of some importance?

"That's exactly why I can reveal lies," Pukin explained.

"I see. Since your profession is about making liars speak the facts."

"Solving cases such as this isn't my principal occupation. But I'm not bad at it."

Suddenly, I wondered—if they were having a torturer resolve this, then would there be torturing?

Pukin looked over at me, and her mouth twisted with malice. “Are you uneasy?”

“What?”

“You needn’t worry. There’s no need for torture, with a case this simple.” With a flutter of her cape, Pukin stood, and the scraps of food on the table were flung to the corners of the room. “Wait with anticipation. Let’s go, Sonia. Time for work.”

The two of them left the room they’d made a terrible mess of, tossing food everywhere during their meal, and I watched them go.

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Two hours passed. It was getting dark outside, while the lamps had been lit indoors. By Pukin’s order, we had gathered at the crime scene. “We” meant myself, two colleagues, the butler, a young maid, a somewhat young maid, a not-so-young maid, a maid of about my mother’s age, the washerwoman, the stable boy, the cook, five or six other servants, and Mister Hoggleton, who was constantly complaining and still in a temper, along with his service daemon, as well as the attendant Sonia.

Checking that essentially all related parties had gathered, Pukin solemnly began to speak—then snorted as if dissatisfied. “This room is too small. This is far too meager a stage for my elegant solving of this mystery.”

“General Your Excellency, I beg your generosity in this matter…what with the number of people involved.”

“Hmm. Well, I shall tolerate it. Now then, I shall speak of what really happened in this incident.”

Everyone in the room murmured.

“Magic cannot be used inside the mansion, and the victim was murdered by someone in a room that was locked from the outside. It seems you all have been making a fuss about how mysterious or inexplicable this is, but what’s hopelessly mysterious to me is how you can’t understand such a simple contrivance.”

Pukin kicked up the long table that stood in the middle of the room. Yes, frighteningly, she kicked it up. The long table, which would have required multiple men to carry, flew up close to the

ceiling, and as some were covering their ears, closing their eyes, opening their mouths wide, and various other reactions of shock, the ground rumbled, and the table hit the floor on its side. Before Mister Hoggleton, the owner of the table, could rightfully yell at her for it, Pukin squatted, grabbed the long, furred rug, and tore it up.

Mister Hoggleton must have been trying to say something, but no words came out, his eyes wide as he just opened and closed his mouth. And since the owner of the house wasn't complaining, there was no one to stop Pukin. With the rug ripped up, she stomped on the exposed floor with a "Hmph," breaking through the wooden boards in one strike.

"Behold." Her fingertip pointed where she had broken through, and we all lined up around the broken floorboards to peer down.

"…A hole?"

However far the hole went, bored into the earth beneath the floor, simply bringing a lamp over to shine into it wasn't enough to see the bottom. It was quite deep.

"As you can see, it's an escape hole. The culprit killed the victim, twisted the knob from the inside to lock the door, and went through the escape hole that was cleverly concealed under the floor to flee this room. Now then, as for where it goes… I have already investigated that matter, as well."

Pukin left the room, and we all followed after her. Mister Hoggleton was clenching his teeth but wasn't grousing or complaining about the violence against his floor, rug, and table. We headed down the mansion's corridor, passing through the great hall, and walked out through the large front door to the outside. Lamps in their hands, the servants moved swiftly forward even in the dim light, and the procession continued from the garden to the washing area, and from there out to the backyard, where we finally stopped.

Pukin spread her arms wide and began to speak in sonorous tones, like an actor. "The entrance was here. A truly clever—"

Someone sneezed *choo* very cutely. It was Sonia. With all eyes turned to her, she shyly rubbed under her nose. The dirt on her gloves smeared there, and Pukin moved her right hand from where it had been resting on her rapier to pull a handkerchief from her chest pocket and wipe under her nose for her.

Then, without touching on how she'd just been interrupted, Pukin continued. "A truly clever method was used to conceal it."

As ordered, Sonia dug up the earth with a shovel, and about

two feet down, it hit something that wasn't earth with a *clunk*. Dropping the shovel, Sonia began digging with her hands, and the men, who had been entranced by her incredible shovel skills, helped her scoop out the soil, exposing a board. To me, watching from above, it looked like a lid.

"Lift the lid, and you see this."

The hole continued into deep darkness, just like we'd seen inside. One of the investigators said, "I'll take a quick look," and jumped inside. I squatted down to investigate what of the hole I could see from there. When I stroked the edge of the hole with my finger, something like black soot came off on it. Five minutes later, the investigator returned, dirty with earth, saying, "Indeed, it does continue onward."

"Er, but…" The butler Allgrave hemmed and hawed like there was something incredibly difficult to say, and his gaze flicked over to his master. Mister Hoggleton closed his mouth and shut his eyes.

"Yes, this is in front of the master's room." Stepping over the hole, Pukin knocked twice on the window. The curtains inside shuddered. She continued: "To dig a hole from here to that room, one would have to dig out the earth and carry it away. It's quite a lot of work. Even if it were done late at night, away from the eyes and ears of others, it would be impossible for Hoggleton, sleeping here, to have failed to notice."

Pukin dropped the "Mister" from Hoggleton's name, but nobody, including the man in question, rebuked her for it. Pukin slowly raised her arm to point at him and declared, "*You* are the culprit."

Everyone around him backed away, and Mister Hoggleton smiled weakly. His shabby beard was listing downward even more shabbily. "I can still feel in my hands what it was like to stab my wife… Every time I was alone, I thought perhaps if I met judgment, that feeling would fade a little, but I just…I just couldn't turn myself in…"

Still hanging his head, he muttered a few words under his breath, and instantly, the service daemon beside him raised its hand and slammed Hoggleton into the ground.

The service daemon was sliced to pieces. Pukin drew her sword, and seeing her in a ready stance, I understood that she'd sliced up the creature in an instant. As the maids were screaming and the servants were running away, I ran up to Hoggleton, who was lying

in a puddle of blood. He was in such a state, it would be absurd to even think he was still alive. The top half of his head had been shattered, and blood was spurting out from the carnage.

"Case closed. I'd call this a happily ever after."

I lifted my head. Pukin's grin could turn the blood in one's veins to ice. I tore my eyes away, and turning to where Pukin was looking, I saw Allgrave standing there, frozen, with an expression like he had swallowed lead.

Having murdered his wife, but still tortured by the guilt, Hoggleton had ordered his service daemon to attack him. His suicide had succeeded most dramatically, and though it had left behind a bad aftertaste, the case was closed. The entire investigation team received a thorough tongue-lashing by the boss for having utterly failed to notice the hidden tunnel. They were spending the day griping about it at the pub.

We returned to boring old mundane lives. It was incredibly rare for a mysterious incident to happen someplace like the Hoggleton estate, where magic couldn't be used, and we of the Intelligence Branch were now spending another day playing bridge behind the boss's back.

"When are you going to return that eight shillings?" I asked. "Payday was three days ago."

"Once I paid two months' worth of rent, most of my income was out the window. Give me until next payday."

If he was thinking his losses by the next payday would still be just eight shillings, he was a naive man. With the goal of squeezing him until he needed a whole guinea to repay me, I faced the game of bridge, and around when that loan of eight shillings became two shillings, we called it a night. It was always like this.

Going to my bed, as I looked up at the sooty ceiling of my cheap lodging, I thought back on things.

Hoggleton had dug a hole to create a room no one else could enter, murdered his wife, and once the truth came out, he had killed himself. It was simple—a simple farce, or so it seemed to me.

Hoggleton was, to be blunt, a bastard. Killing his wife was one thing, but he wasn't such a laudable character that he would be

possessed by guilt, and even if his crime were exposed, I doubted he would acknowledge it so easily. With a man like Hoggleton, even if he were made to stand on the gallows, he would continue to insist that he didn't do it. But I had only known him for a day; if I were more up-front about my feelings, I would be gently chided with something like, *"Yes, that was one side of him. But he wasn't that kind of man."* However, I'm certain: He was a real bastard.

When I thought about what had happened that day, the faces of those two magical girls rose in my mind.

Pukin and Sonia, who had seemed dissatisfied with the amount of food that had been served to them.

When Hoggleton had killed himself, Pukin's expression had been completely different from the shock of those around her… Her grin that stretched from ear to ear like she was enjoying herself, like she was glad—even just remembering it sent shivers down my spine.

Sonia had gathered attention while Pukin had been talking. She'd wiped under her nose, and dirtied it with earth. That meant there had been earth on her gloves. Why? Wasn't it because she had been ordered by Pukin to dig that hole? Magic couldn't be used inside that mansion, but you surely could use magic underground, beneath the building. With magic, one could have dug out that long escape tunnel in a short period of time without anyone noticing. One wouldn't be able to go through the floor, and a hidden door couldn't be made in a short time, but Pukin's destruction of the floor had kept that from being known. She had made it out to be a "clever escape hole" that even the inspectors, masters in their craft, hadn't been able to discover with their thorough search.

And there was one more thing about Sonia's sneeze. The timing of it had focused everyone's attention on her. Even I had reflexively looked over at her. I had immediately looked back at Pukin after, but that moment, Pukin's right hand had been resting on the hilt of her rapier. I don't think she had been touching her rapier before I'd looked over at Sonia. And Pukin isn't the sort of character who would be so startled by her attendant's cute sneeze that she put her hand on her hilt.

Just what was that rapier all about? If a magical girl was carrying a sword as if it was meaningful, then the blade surely was bestowed with some kind of magic. It wasn't simply that it was sharp enough to cut that service daemon to pieces—for example, if

it could control people's behavior, then that would explain almost everything.

If she could make Sonia sneeze, then use the moment when everyone was looking away to control Hoggleton… If one assumed her deliberately leading all related parties out of the mansion was to use her magic, then it would all make sense.

If she had used magic to create the hole that day and used magic to control Hoggleton to make him confess and take his own life just to solve the case…then as long as the Magical Kingdom had the confession and circumstantial evidence, they would not make to investigate further. Everyone present that day believed Hoggleton was the culprit—I doubted there was anyone who would think otherwise, even if you searched the whole world.

If these speculations I indulged in before sleeping were close to the truth, then why had she framed Hoggleton for the crime? Was she executing a villain for the sake of societal justice? Had someone asked her to do it—was she an assassin to eliminate Hoggleton, because he was an obstacle? Either reason would have been plausible, yet neither felt right.

This is what I think. If Hoggleton had given Pukin enough food to eat, then perhaps he would not have met such a fate.

If that was the case, then who was the true culprit? Countless times, I formulated hypotheses, reeled them in, broke down each part, then reinforced them, building up to something that seemed it might just be the truth. I'd never done something of this sort before, but it was rather fun.

The culprit had murdered Missus Hoggleton. Using the safe key she carried, they had stolen the promissory notes. They had burned them down to ash on the table or burned them elsewhere and left the remnants on the table. Following which they had tied an oil-soaked thread around the knob or stuck it there with powerful glue. Passing it under the door, they would have put the opposite end of the string outside. They left the room, then after closing the door, they pulled the string, turning the knob from the outside. And then they ignited the string to burn the evidence. As for the resulting ash, the part of it that was outside of the room, they would carefully clean up, while the part that remained inside the room would be hidden by the scattering of the ash from the promissory notes. The odds were high that the burning of the notes was not the goal but an act of camouflage. If the culprit didn't want to be

among the list of suspects, then it was very unlikely they were a debtor.

This crime would have been possible for a maid, servant, stable boy, or cook to pull off. However, I remembered Pukin and Allgrave after Hoggleton's death. I came to get a vague sense of who the culprit was. Pukin had figured out the truth but ignored it. She'd seen through the criminal and cast that aside as well, instead constructing a fake scenario for her own pleasure. That had to have been what Pukin's and Allgrave's expressions had meant then. Allgrave must have been scared out of his wits.

I rolled over in bed, still lost in thought. Pukin was very dangerous. Just a brief investigation of the data on her had produced a mountain of information. Apparently, before the Magical Kingdom started respecting a suspect's human rights, she'd been considerably reckless… In other words, she was utterly fascinating. Having grown tired of my work and exhausted with life, I found her wild behavior invigorated me, albeit only for a moment.

The boss had been the one to request Pukin handle this job. He would know her contact information. I rolled over in bed once more, making a mental note to try floating the question the next day.

The Blue Magical Girls Are Busy

This story is set before the game in *Magical Girl Raising Project restart* begins.

The Blue Magical Girls Are Busy

The girl moved just her eyes to watch the sky. It was covered by thick clouds, concealing the moon, stars, and sky from view. The wind was strong and cold. There were only the swaying reeds and bare, rough rocks jutting out from the ground.

She narrowed her eyes. Her preliminary investigation was complete. There were no sorts of traps or contrivances around. As a warrior, she would engage in no such cowardly behavior, but she always took measures against foul play. A disgraceful loss would be not only her own personal shame, it would be a shame to her teacher, elders, the younger students—everyone.

She brought her hands to her neck to retie her necktie. It was blue, her representative color, a beautiful azure that would bring to mind the clear summer skies. Looking at this color would calm the heart and hone the nerves, even when battle was before her. Even under the blast of a cold wind, she would overlook no sight or sound.

On the eastern side, from behind where the rocks towered high, she heard the sound of running feet. They climbed up, arrived at the top, and from there, came rushing down lightly. The girl listened closely to the sound of the footsteps without turning to look, arms folded as she waited for that someone to run up to her.

“You’re late. Are you trying to play it like Musashi?”

The someone struck a pose and cried, “The blue flash descends on the battlefield! Lapis Lazuline!”

“Lapis…Lazuline?” A crease formed in the girl’s brow as she looked back at the newcomer. Her costume was blue all over, and she had a white-and-brown tail. On her back was a cape with the same pattern as the tail. The girl had never forgotten any of it—from the black hair that was just shy of touching her shoulders to the dark mole by her eye. This was her. Every time she remembered this girl’s face, the memories were so vivid, it would make her face twist with humiliation and shame. The name, however, was unfamiliar.

“I thought you were Blue Comet.”

“Yeah, my name got changed recently. I inherited this one from my master.”

“Well…congratulations.”

“Yep.”

“And what a coincidence.”

“Coincidence?”

“I also changed my name.” She turned to the other girl to show her the back of her left hand. On it was a blue dragon with a long, twisting body that held its own tail in its mouth. “I was once called Panas, the Azure Dragon.”

“It’s different now?”

The girl—Panas—raised up her right hand next to the left, showing her the back of this one as well. On it was a black dragon with its wings spread, ready to take flight. “Now, I am no longer an azure dragon. I am the Twin Dragons Panas. You would do well to assume I’m not the same as I was before.”

“Ooooh, that’s pretty cool.” Squinting and leaning in, Lazuline examined the two dragons.

Panas snorted, responding, “Once, during an Archfiend Cram School event…you and I had an encounter.”

“That was a real rough moment. I mean, having a super-strong opponent suddenly show up right at the beginnin’ and all.”

Panas sucked in a slightly longish breath, then exhaled in many short breaths through her mouth. There had not been a single day since that event when she had not dreamed of a rematch with the

blue magical girl. It had been a battle royal–style exercise in a forest, with multiple girls all fighting in a melee. Panas had only been sort of half listening to the instructions from Archfiend Pam to be careful of the participants from outside the school. She had been aiming for victory. She would knock everyone down. Panas took to the challenge eagerly; her very first opponent, Blue Comet, had been stronger than she'd expected, and Panas struggled to hold her own. In her shock, the situation then took a turn for the worse. The next thing she knew, she was found on a bed in the first-aid station, looking up at the roof of the tent. It had been nowhere near victory. Her first opponent had become her last.

Some magical girls might have retired out of shame, but Panas never considered gracefully backing away. She knew herself. She believed she was still on track as a magical girl. A swift retirement would not free her from the humiliation—she had to become strong and win.

She'd returned to the Archfiend Cram School, her alma mater, and appealed directly to the Archfiend, saying she wanted to retrain herself as a new student. After that had come training and more training, fighting upon more fighting, more and more studying, practicing, honing her skills, crossing the line of death, making her body strong, making her magic strong, all to the point where the other students feared her as a madwoman. She had continued to train for over a year, evolving her physical abilities and developing a new element of her magic. And now, finally, she was certain she could win.

Lazuline stared rudely at the dragons and tilted her head. "About your magic, Panacchi."

Panas glared at Lazuline. "By 'Panacchi,' are you referring to me?"

"Uh-huh. So, Panacchi, I take it your magic basically materializes the dragon drawings on your hands to make 'em attack and stuff?"

"Don't call them 'drawings.'"

"What should I call 'em?"

"Dragon crests. Back when I was Azure Dragon Panas, it was the most I could do to control one dragon. But now that I've become the Twin Dragons, I've acquired magic powers that far surpass those I had in the past."

Raising up her left hand, she cried, "Jörmungandr!"

Raising up her right hand, she cried, “Níðhöggr!”

She had merely shown her cards because she wanted to have a fair match. Taking her opponent by surprise to win with a magic they weren’t aware of may well be victory, but it wasn’t the victory Panas wanted. It wouldn’t wipe away her humiliation-stained memories.

Lazuline tilted her head to the left. “In other words, if ya get more crests, you’ll get stronger and stronger? Won’t increasin’ ’em a whole lot end up being too much to handle?”

Why did this girl have to be so worried about her? Choking down bitter feelings, Panas explained, “Even simply increasing from one to two requires intense training that would kill your average magical girl five times over. It’s not something that can be increased indefinitely just because you want more.”

“Well, that’s good. I was wondering what’d happen if, in the end, ya wind up tattooed all over like Hoichi the Earless.”

Panas did her best to restrain the impulse to punch the thoughtlessly grinning girl before her. She was even sad to think that she’d trained all this time in order to defeat someone who lacked any sort of nervousness at all. But she couldn’t change the fact that she’d once lost to this girl. And even if her rival was not the one Panas would have wanted, it wouldn’t do for a warrior to get worked up about it.

Panas took three deep breaths, and once she’d calmed herself, she turned back to Lazuline. “You will now learn of the power of the Twin Dragons.”

“Oh, I knew it! You suddenly started explainin’, so I wondered just what was goin’ on there. Man, I’m so happy. This’ll be the memory of a lifetime. Ridin’ on a dragon’s back to fly into the sky has been a dream of mine since I was a little kid.” Lazuline smiled happily.

Panas gave her a questioning look in return. “What are you talking about?”

“I mean, you’re gonna teach me ’bout the power of your dragons, right?”

“Just how does that mean you can ride on one to fly through the sky?”

“We’re about to go out for ramen, right? And if you’re goin’ to teach me the power of the dragons, that means basically, we’re goin’ to ride the dragons to go to a ramen shop, right?”

"…Huh?"

"When ya called me all the way out here into the middle of nowhere with no people around, y'know, my heart was pounding, wonderin' what was gonna happen. But now I've switched from heart-poundin' mode to tremblin' with excitement mode."

"Hold on a second."

"What?"

"What do you mean, ramen shop?"

Lazuline looked at Panas with an expression of sincere bafflement. "For real? Ya didn't know about ramen shops, Panas? A ramen shop is—"

"No! I'm not asking what a ramen shop is. I'm quite familiar with them. I eat ramen about once a week, and I also don't scrimp in the effort to search for good shops online."

"'Course ya do. It's soul food, right? Man, ya startled me, there."

"What I want to know is why you believe I would take you to a ramen shop."

"'Cause it was written in the letter ya gave me, Panacchi." Lazuline reached under her cape and pulled out some stationery Panas recognized. It was the invitation to duel that she'd sent Lazuline. The wind blowing on the ledge made the letter flap loudly, so Lazuline squatted there to hold down the sides of the paper with both hands. Panas circled around to the windward side, guarding the letter from the gale as she leaned close. The content of the letter was as Panas had thought it was, and she couldn't see any parts that had been altered. Of course, there was no mention of ramen.

"There's nothing about ramen in here."

"It's here, right here. Look, it says, *I haven't forgotten that time*. And it also says, *Now is the time to fulfill my long-standing desire*."

"So? Ramen has nothing to do with it. At our last encounter, I was met with defeat, and in my single-minded pursuit of claiming victory against you, I tortured myself, training continuously. Now that the Azure Dragon has become the Twin Dragons, finally, I am certain that I have surpassed you. My long-standing desire to battle y—"

"I don't really get it, but…that's kinda strange, don't ya think?"

"Hmph. Perhaps a common magical girl like yourself would not understand the pride of a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School."

“That’s not what I mean. I mean, back durin’ that event, ya didn’t really lose, though. Right, Panacchi?”

“Huh?” Panas stood up and retied her necktie.

Lazuline likewise got to her feet, tucking the letter back under her cape, and looked at Panas like she was at a loss. “Ya don’t remember?”

“I’ve not once forgotten since that day. I, being not of the Archfiend Cram School, underestimated you, and your unexpected skills gradually overwhelmed me, and then when I came to, I was on the bed in the first-aid tent.”

“I didn’t beat ya, Panacchi.”

“Of all the things you could say…”

Lazuline opened her right palm, waving her hand side to side in front of her face. “I ain’t lyin’. I was thinkin’ like whoa, this girl’s strong, maybe I’m screwed for real if my first opponent’s this good, and then when we were fightin’, there was this big explosion behind you, and ya got blasted away and your head buried in the ground, and ya got knocked out. I dug ya up and carried ya to the first-aid tent.”

Panas put her right hand on her jaw and looked up at the sky. The wind was strong, and there was no sign the clouds would clear from the skies. She tried to remember what had happened then, but of course she couldn’t recall what had happened while she was unconscious.

“No, wait,” said Panas. “Yes, I do remember something. Blue Comet retrieved Panas the Azure Dragon’s points flag. That’s proof that you defeated me.”

“I got the flag from ya when you were passed out, Panacchi. If you go to the first-aid tent to get treated, that’s game over, so I figured it was okay for me to get the flag… Should I not have?”

Panas put her hand on her jaw once more and considered. All she remembered was who had gotten whose flag, in the end. From the fact that Blue Comet had retrieved a flag from someone who had fallen, it wouldn’t be strange for it to be made out that she had defeated Panas. And even if she were to search for material to deny that, she wasn’t going to find anything. Panas thought and thought and thought, and when Lazuline impatiently came to examine her face, Panas clapped her hands.

“Indeed, there may actually be a shred of truth in what you’ve said.”

"'Course it's true. I'm just bein' honest about the whole thing."

"But ramen has nothing at all to do with anything we've discussed, has it? You've been spouting nonsense in an attempt to confuse me, haven't you?"

"When I was carryin' ya to the first-aid tent, it looked like you were havin' a nightmare, and you were sayin' *ramen…ramen…*the whole time. That's what I thought ya meant by *that time*. And that your long-standin' desire was eatin' ramen."

"Lies!"

"I ain't lyin'!"

"I would never be so blindly obsessed with ramen!"

"What kinda ramen do ya like, Panacchi?"

"In magical-girl form, I prefer the largest sizes and fattier cuts of pork. Women typically find strong flavor, large portions, and high calories undesirable in food, but as a magical girl, you can simply enjoy all of that without a care in the world. Magical girls can further enjoy ramen thanks to our sharp sense of smell, which allows us to better appreciate the aromas of Kumamoto ramen or Kurume ramen. In human form, I prefer the light flavor of chicken or seafood base over the heavier types. But a thick, rich *tonkotsu* is great with *tsukemen* even in human form, mixing the springy thick noodles and the soft flat noodles together."

"You *are* obsessed with ramen!"

"Only as a simple pleasure! Who would cry for ramen when they're on death's door?!"

"*You* were crying for ramen, Panacchi!"

"I was not!"

They yelled at each other, glared at each other, and finally, Panas was the first to avert her gaze. It wasn't that she was lacking in fighting spirit. She just realized from an objective standpoint how much of a waste of time this was.

"Understood. Let us leave the matter of ramen aside. Even if we argue now about who was in the right, it's not as if any evidence or witnesses will appear."

"I'm not lyin'."

"Never mind the ramen. It's not the real issue here."

"Oh?"

"Even if what you say is true…even if it's true that I was caught in an explosion and passed out, and you stole my flag…"

"Stole? That's a mean way to put it."

Panas stuck up the index finger of her right hand and pointed it at Lazuline. “Then that still means our match has not yet been settled!”

“Yeah, well, I guess.”

“Then we must fight.”

“We must?”

A particularly strong wind blew through. Panas’s necktie danced in the wind, fluttering in front of her face, but Panas chose to pay it no mind. “Of course,” Panas continued. “Today, here and now, we shall settle matters. You are also a warrior. You cannot say you will run.”

“I’m not gonna run, but… Ah, now I’m stuck, huh?” Lazuline scratched the back of her head, folded her arms, looked up at the sky, unfolded her arms, and scratched her head one more time. Meanwhile, she muttered something under her breath. “The truth is, my master asked me to handle some stuff… If we had a duel now and I lost, or even if I won, but then I couldn’t move, then I’d be forced to tell my master at the last minute that I can’t do it.”

“Why did you agree to do errands when we’re about to have a duel?”

“’Cause I didn’t think we were actually gonna have a duel. The plan was that we go eat ramen! I figured I could finish the business for my master on the way back.”

“That’s understandable, but…”

Panas had no intention of letting Lazuline leave unharmed. She didn’t think of her as an opponent she could hold back with.

And since she wouldn’t limit herself, that meant she would beat her opponent down. And once Lazuline had been reduced to a pulp here, she would be quite unable to complete the errands her teacher had requested of her.

Being a graduate of the Archfiend Cram School, the word “master” was extremely weighty to Panas. If Archfiend Pam had asked her to do something, and then Panas were forced to cancel that at the very last minute…

Pressing down her wildly flapping necktie with her right hand, Panas looked at Lazuline. She was groaning “hmm, hmm…” like she really didn’t know what to do. Though Lazuline was her fated foe, the one with whom she’d been wishing for a rematch for a long year, Panas had come to seriously doubt the basis for Lazuline being her sworn enemy and was actually feeling kind of bad about it.

Maybe Panas was the one who should be yielding here.

"Then let us do this," Panas said. "We'll do things in the opposite order. You finish this business for your master first. After that, you fight me. So then, even if you become incapacitated from fighting me, it won't be a problem."

"Ohhh! Good idea! Then let's head down the mountain together."

"…Why do I have to go with you?"

"C'mon, now, Panacchi. It'd be bad if you were to just let me go and finish the business for my master, and then I'm like, *Ah, great, now I guess I'll go home*, right? Ya may not think so, but right here is the magical girl who can easily win the title of General Forgetful. It's a bad idea to leave me alone."

Now that Lazuline had said that, Panas was uneasy. She didn't think Lazuline would up and run away, but she did have an air to her like she would forget things when it was convenient for her.

"So then you come down the mountain together with me! On that dragon!" Lazuline pointed to the back of Panas's hand, her eyes positively sparkling.

Panas did rather get the impression that Lazuline ultimately just wanted to ride a dragon, but even if that were true, would parting ways now be a good idea?

Panas looked up at the sky. The clouds were becoming thicker and darker. The wind was blowing harder, too. It could start raining. If she was going to wait until Lazuline came back, then she couldn't be like, *Oh, it's raining now, so I'm going home*. Simply imagining getting turned into a drowned rat waiting was enough to make her feel miserable. Panas made up her mind.

"I'll go as well."

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Each tap of heels on the floor made the footsteps ring through the warehouse. Perhaps it was her tension that was making the mere sound of footsteps so particularly grating to the ear. And Panas wasn't the only one who was tense. The man in the black suit with the silvery metal briefcase as well as the magical girl in an all-black costume who stood beside him wore tight expressions, alert and on guard. Only Lazuline, the one they were so wary of, was smiling

lackadaisically, which just heightened the tension.

The situation of being in a warehouse at the pier and receiving a metal briefcase from a man in a black suit would make anyone tense. Panas did not ask exactly what it was they were doing. She didn't think prying into it would result in anything pleasant.

With cautious footsteps, the man in the black suit edged toward Lazuline and handed over the briefcase. Lazuline casually took it from him and popped it under her cape.

The man sighed deeply, and the magical girl at his side shot Lazuline a glare. "Bringing a bodyguard? Seems like you don't trust us, huh?"

A bodyguard—that seemed to refer to Panas. She very much wanted to correct them, but she didn't want to get involved, if possible.

When Panas said nothing, Lazuline opened her mouth. "She's not my bodyguard. She's a friend."

"A friend? Don't make me laugh. The dragons on your hands… You're Twin Dragons Panas, aren't you? Bringing an Archfiend Cram School graduate here, do you think saying 'my friend just happens to be with me' will work—?"

"I'm not Twin Dragons Panas."

Panas folded her arms, answering boldly without showing a modicum of the anxiety she was feeling. The pair in black closed their mouths, staring at her. They seemed suspicious.

"I get mistaken for her a lot—we look so similar."

"…Huh, is that right? Well, it doesn't really matter who you are anyway."

If this exchange, which at a glance looked like an illegal one, was actually an illegal exchange, and if the two in black were arrested and said something like, *"The Twin Dragons Panas was there when the deal was made,"* then even Panas, who wasn't a part of this, would be investigated. She didn't know if insisting she had nothing to do with it would work or not.

I'm someone else, I'm not Panas, she told herself. The pair in black's dubious looks at her never changed. Lazuline offered them a twelve-inch-squared black paulownia wood box, and they grabbed it and left the pier warehouse. The grating sound of footsteps faded out, and after some time passed, Panas unfolded her arms and retied her necktie.

"Right, then you're done with your business? Then it's time to

duel."

"Sorry. There's still somethin' else." Lazuline raised a hand in an apologetic gesture, and Panas gave her a look of sincere exasperation.

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Once they were done with the warehouse deal, they headed a few dozen miles northwest, this time, going into town. When Panas wondered just what they were going to do, Lazuline dragged her into a building at the end of a back alley that looked like a day care or a preschool. Apparently, it was some sort of home for orphans.

"'Kay then, you melt the butter with that hot water. Ah, watch out not to get it directly in the water."

"Okaaay!"

"You separate the whites from the yolks. Do it all careful like, so ya don't mix them up."

Lazuline gave instructions, and the children did as they were told. While everyone there was properly doing their jobs, Panas alone was confused, standing there. Lazuline handed the briefcase from before to the older woman who seemed to be in charge of this facility, and in exchange, she received a large cardboard box.

"Thanks," said Lazuline.

"Oh no, thank you. The children worked hard making these."

"Naw, thanks for real. Having this'll be a huge help."

Panas had assumed this would be another sort of deal, but that was not so. Surrounded by children in aprons and headcloths, Lazuline also put on an apron and a headcloth, handing over a paper bag to Panas, and inside was another apron and headcloth. Though Panas did put them on, she didn't get the point.

"Hey, what's this about?" asked Panas.

"Apparently, my master gives this place a lot of money. She's like Tiger Mask, huh?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Today's a bakin' class. We're gonna make a cake so good, it'll make your cheeks fall off."

"Why would I help with something like that?"

"Then I'm gonna ask ya to handle this, Panacchi. I want ya to beat this until it peaks." Lazuline handed her a bowl with the

whites that had just been separated from the yolks and an egg whisk.

Panas pondered for a moment. She didn't know what Lazuline meant by all this, but if Panas didn't get this done, then Lazuline's errand wouldn't get done, either.

Making up her mind, with her right hand on the beater and her left holding the bowl, she beat the whites hard. Whipped with the strength of a magical girl, never mind becoming a meringue, the whites splattered everywhere, and the children shrieked.

"Panacchi! What are you doing?!"

"I-I'm sorry."

"You're supposed to whip 'em gently and lightly!"

The children quickly cleaned up the huge mess Panas had made, saying encouraging things like, "This stuff happens" and "Don't get discouraged, miss!" and "Let's all pitch in," before returning to their own tasks. *What mature little brats…er, children.* Panas mentally thanked them, then resumed her task.

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Once they were done baking the cake, they crossed four prefectural borders to arrive at the next location.

Smack-dab in an area with nothing but rice fields all around sat a brand-new gymnasium. If there had been an analyst there, they may have told them something about the harms of government policy that was overfocused on the construction of community buildings. The parking lot was pretty full, heavily clashing with the deserted surrounding scenery.

Panas was led through to a spacious room that she was told was a changing room, and it was full of young women who were busy putting on makeup and costumes.

Inside the paper bag she was handed was a magical-girl costume. The fabric looked cheap.

"What is this?" Panas asked.

"It's a Cutie Altair costume. Oh, would you have preferred Cutie Vega, Panacchi? But you're more like Altair, figure-wise."

"That's not what I'm asking. What sort of gathering is this?"

"It's a local cosplay event."

"And why must I participate in it?"

“My master said the cooperation of professional magical girls is essential for the development of regional magical-girl culture. Frankly, I don’t really get it, but she’s probably right.”

Panas got the feeling that she was being wheedled into this with plausible-sounding but bunk logic. But if she were to say no now and Lazuline were to get away from her, then all her efforts until now would have been for nothing. Going out to the warehouse by the pier and playing bodyguard, as well as making cake with the children and getting laughed at for the whipped cream on her cheek would all become meaningless.

She couldn’t have that. Panas sighed and accepted the paper bag.

“The dos and don’ts are all written down here,” said Lazuline. “I want ya to read over it. Veeeeery occasionally, some pests’ll turn up to these types of events. Of course, ya can’t be causin’ problems yourself, either.”

“Don’t insult me. I’ve been a veteran magical girl for a very long time. I know how to deal with magical-girl fans. Don’t take me for some meathead.”

Five minutes after the event had begun, Panas was already exhausted.

When people asked her to pose, she was obligated to do so, and she always had to smile and look like she was enjoying herself. She felt so many rude gazes all over her body that it physically pained her. Fortunately, there was no excessive physical contact or extreme low-angle photography going on or anything, but she was so unused to being a model, it drained both her body and soul.

Though they couldn’t have realized the two of them were real magical girls, a particularly large crowd gathered around Panas and Lazuline, and they could hardly see what was going on elsewhere, which only made Panas more uneasy. It was also quite humiliating to be wearing Cutie Altair’s outfit. She knew Altair from the Archfiend Cram School—a real surly character. If Panas were to act out the woman herself, then she should be sullenly brooding instead of smiling. When they’d gone camping, Altair had burned their fresh fish all black until it was practically ash, insisting, “This is how they do it at my home,” and had offered not one word of apology. It pissed Panas off even to this day.

Back-to-back with Lazuline, who was wearing the outfit of Cutie Altair’s partner in the anime, Cutie Vega, they posed, and Lazuline

whispered quietly, “See, I knew you’d be great! You’ve got a dazzling smile, Panacchi.”

She thought it’d feel real good to punch Lazuline, but if she were to do something like that while the cameras were flashing, that would leave evidence. And if that evidence were to get circulated to Archfiend Pam… Forcing down the anger inside with a smile, Panas showed off her Cutie Healer poses.

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After the cosplay event went off without a hitch, Panas and Lazuline were on the gymnasium stage. They could see outside through the still-open doors that the participants were going home. Watching the cars disperse beyond the rice fields made her feel rather gloomy. It wasn’t the fault of the cars—it was the fault of Lazuline and her master. Already, half a day had passed since they’d originally met up for their duel.

Lazuline set down her armful-sized cardboard box down on the floor to check its contents.

“What is that?” Panas asked.

“The secret weapon I just got. Though the one flaw is that it’s a little bulky.”

“A secret weapon, you say? What do you plan to do next? Or rather, how long is this going to go on? What does your master want to do?”

“Hey now, calm down.” Lazuline pulled out something like a notepad from under her cape and flipped through it. “Accordin’ to the schedule my master made, it’s about time… Ah, here they are.”

Sensing something had come, the moment Panas readied herself, slightly over ten presences appeared within the gym, surrounding Lazuline and Panas. They didn’t come running or walking—the dark, shapeless “somethings” that suddenly appeared there reminded Panas of her master Archfiend Pam’s wings. She couldn’t see the expressions on their faces, but she sensed no anxiety or fear from them.

The things weren’t only inside the gym. There were more outside, stirring and writhing.

“Now you’ve done it!” A voice came from the entrance. It was the magical girl in black who’d been in the warehouse at the pier.

From behind the writhing somethings, she was giving Lazuline a stabbing death glare. She raised up high that black wooden box and slammed it down against the floor. The box cracked open, the hinges came off, and blown by the wind, it scattered apart. There was nothing in it.

"Giving me a stupid empty box! You may have tried to outwit us, but you won't get away with it!"

"If I return what ya gave me, will ya forgive me?" Lazuline's voice was calm.

"Just giving it back won't be enough. You're going to offer payment to make up for it. Give up all your place's research results to us. Then we'll forgive you."

"Um, I dunno about that… My master's note said not to give it back."

"If you're not giving it back, then all the more reason for this." The magical girl in black raised her right hand. But right before she could snap her fingers, without any forewarning at all, Lazuline boldly drop-kicked one of the somethings that was protecting the magical girl, smashing it and the girl together out the door.

Panas jumped to the side to dodge the enemy that grabbed for her, after which Lazuline knocked it down with a punch. Struck, the something popped like a balloon, flying apart.

Lazuline punched down three more somethings. The somethings stopped rushing for them wildly, instead encircling Lazuline and Panas from a distance. They seemed to have some brains, as they closed in gradually, trying to constrict the circle around them. Lazuline looked over in the direction she'd tossed the black magical girl and went, "Ohhh." The girl was at the gym entrance. She carried a big jar on her shoulder, and *something* was oozing out of it like mud and coming into form. It was coming out at a frighteningly quick pace, and the whole gym was about to be buried by the black somethings.

"There's a lot of them," said Panas.

"Uh-huh."

Panas had worried quite a lot, expecting that Lazuline would come to rely on her, and so she'd figured she'd help, but Lazuline was calmly pulling little balls out from the cardboard box on the floor in front of her. They were the type you'd see at the ball-scoop game stands at night markets.

"Bouncy balls…"

“They’re Lazuline balls. They’ve got scrap gems in ’em.”

“Oh…?”

“The kids from the place where we just baked that cake made ’em for me.”

Thrown with the strength of a magical girl, the countless high-rebound rubber balls bounced rapidly around the gym, from wall to wall, from ceiling to floor. Then one of the rubber balls transformed into Lazuline. No—it didn’t turn into her. She’d moved instantly to the position of the ball.

Lazuline kicked off the wall in a three-point jump. She stomped through the floorboards to hit the enemy, striking it down. Simultaneously, at the other end of the gym in the other direction, she went from a low sweeping kick to dropping her heel in an ax kick. The rubber balls rebounded all over the gym, bouncing in an irregular manner, making it hard to even follow them with your eyes.

With a flutter of her cape, Lazuline flicked away a rubber ball, then appeared again in the position she’d sent it to. She used the recoil of a punch to the enemy to bounce another ball, appearing again at the end of its trajectory. With moves that would dazzle the eye, she was going around crushing the somethings.

Panas was practically entranced by the way Lazuline moved so smoothly, like she knew where every single enemy was. Her *jab, jab, hook, uppercut, straight punch* combo just kept on destroying each different foe in each different location. *Turn kick low, middle, high, spinning hook kick*—the combination moves done in anticipation of an individual opponent had been sublimated to a technique used against multiple targets.

Enemies were flying every which way, destroying the walls of the gym. But their number wasn’t actually going down. The somethings welled up from no place in particular, oozing out to appear in the parking lot, the field outside, and inside the gymnasium.

The enemy was coming for Panas, too. But she was not going to stand there and take it.

Raising up her left hand, she cried, “Jörmungandr!”

The dragon’s tail, over thirty feet long, made to mow down everything around, but multiple black somethings banded together to stop it. They were tougher than she’d thought.

Raising up her right hand, she cried, “Níðhöggr!”

The dragon's jaws bit into the black somethings, piercing them with its fangs, and on top of that, it breathed flames that scorched the whole area. Without even a scream, the group of somethings turned to vapor. She burned up the gym floor, melting off every metallic part, leaving the interior exposed. Panas covered her mouth and backed away to escape the high-temperature gas and steam.

"You *are* Twin Dragons Panas from the Archfiend Cram School, after all! I know that magic!" the magical girl in black was yelling outside the door.

Panas yelled back, "No, I'm just paying homage to her magic!" She decided to play dumb until the very end.

The fierce battle very quickly made the gym collapse, and even if the area was nothing but rice fields, making that much of a ruckus, there was no way they wouldn't get noticed, and when cop cars and ambulance sirens began to sound, the enemy fled, and Lazuline and Panas also ran into a nearby forest, somehow avoiding detection.

Panas was tired. Even the Archfiend Cram School's hellish training had never been this exhausting. It wasn't that she was tired only from the fighting—she was mentally exhausted, too.

Lazuline extended a hand to Panas, who was leaning against a big tree. "Okay, Panacchi, I've done my errands for my master, so we can finally fight."

"Ahhh… Okay. By the way, about that gym… For compensation…"

"Ya don't hafta worry 'bout that. Apparently, the mayor here wanted to rebuild it 'cause he got some subsidy from the federal government, but the gym was still too new, and nothing about it was broken, so he was having trouble. Destroyin' it was one of the errands for my master."

Hearing this very dirty story made Panas even more depressed. Taking the hand extended to her, with a heave, she got up, and Lazuline showed her the biggest smile of the day.

"Which ramen place do ya wanna go to? Ya know some good ones, right?"

Panas looked back at Lazuline and pondered for a while. This girl had already forgotten just why Panas had been sticking with her all this time. But Panas didn't have any more energy left to yell

at her.

Swallowing her sigh, Panas turned back to Lazuline and nodded. “There’s a shop around here that serves good curry ramen.”

“Ooh, curry ramen! I’ve never had that before!”

“You’ve never lived until you’ve had curry ramen.”

Panas stuck her finger in the gap between her collar and necktie and tugged hard to loosen it. The two blue magical girls began walking off toward the ramen shop.

Afterword

Hello, this is Asari Endou. I write the *Magical Girl Raising Project* series. There are quite a lot of characters in it, and since every one of them has a story, there are often things I can't fit into the main novels. The result is that I take these sorts of secret tales, make them into short stories, and send them out into the world.

This book is composed of those short stories. It's the second of its kind in this series. The second book—That's a scary thing, huh? On the special site Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project, which is currently on This Manga Is Amazing Web, they have stuff like popularity contests where you vote for which girls you want to be featured in a short story. The winners end up in this book for you all to see.

For those who are curious about who won the popularity contest and which were the most popular short stories, please do check it out on Monthly Magical Girl Raising Project. I refresh the page about three times a day to check the rankings. There's lots of info about the anime, the merch, all sorts of stuff. It's seriously a lot of fun.

Now then, as you can see, the new short stories for this volume were produced a little differently from usual. And if you ask how it turned out, in the end… Below is a conversation between S-mura and me after all the short stories were done.

"There's a bit of a problem."

"A problem?"

"One of the magical girls shows up too often even though she never won the contest."

"Huh? Is there?"

"Tot Pop appears in three stories."

"Ahhh… Now that you mention it, yes. About where was Tot Pop in the ranking, again?"

“Around the middle. She had about the same number of votes as Mina Mad Gardener Acre.”

“Leaving aside how that character got enough votes to be ranked that high—what do we do about this? I can’t really change who shows up in the stories…”

“Just do some casual teasing in the afterword.”

“Oh. That’s all, huh…?”

So that’s what happened.

As a writer, having a character who’s a veteran magical girl, friends with Keek, a student of Frederica, affiliated with an antiestablishment faction, and able to befriend pretty much anyone is so convenient—er, charming, so surely you can understand that, right? Give her thirty minutes, and she won’t just be showing up in stories, she’ll even pop up outside the book to get in the way of things. She can easily break through the fourth wall. Watch out for Tot Pop, readers.

To everyone from the editing department who has offered me guidance, and to S-mura, who has so kindly educated me on the dangers of Tot Pop: Thank you so much.

To Marui-no, thank you very much for your wonderful illustrations. Over the course of this series, you’ve illustrated a whole lot of characters who hardly get any time in human form. Thus far, my style has been to have magical girls watching over me while I write about magical girls, but you’ve shown me a new path: that humans are also not bad. I think I’ll enjoy this path for what it is, too.

And to all my readers who have bought this book, thank you very much. The official anime site has launched, and the manga adaptation of *Magical Girl Raising Project restart* has been announced, and there will be various forms of media coming out in the future, too. I hope you enjoy those as well.

Now then, let us meet again in the next story.

I mentioned in my illustrator bio how happy I was about the magical girls featured in the color insert, but now that I've finished all the illustrations, this book as a whole has a ton of characters I'm a fan of!

It goes without saying that the magical girls in *Magical Girl Raising Project* are all charming, but even the boys are, too.

The endorphin rush never ends.

Thank you very much!

Marui-no

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